

“WE CLEARED THE LAND WITH OUR OWN HANDS”: SPACE AND PLACE IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY BUILDING AND FREEDOM STRUGGLES IN THE
MISSOURI BOOTHEEL, 1890-1968

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on African American community building and Black freedom struggles has demonstrated the centrality of the Black working class to social, political, and economic transformations in the twentieth-century rural South. Yet, our understanding of how African Americans actively engaged in power struggles over space, and the nature of struggle in the Border South, has been under-analyzed. This dissertation looks at the significance of space and place to African American life in the Missouri Bootheel, or Missouri Delta, during the region's metamorphosis from a sparsely populated region of lowland swamps, to an agricultural "Promised Land" that included vast fields of cotton farmed by sharecroppers. It explores the ways in which African Americans acted as central agents in this transformation through their labor in the forests and fields, their planning visions, politics and their influence on the built environment through institution, neighborhood and town-building. White supremacy was embedded in the region's social and economic fabric, but its power was not absolute. This dissertation argues that African Americans used the instability of key periods of social and economic change and the relative fluidity and unpredictability of race relations in a Border South region to push for access to rural industrial jobs, public space, land, schools and housing. African Americans' strategies for community building and activism varied, but their establishment of Black institutions and rural Black towns and enclaves, independent of plantation space, was central to struggles in these arenas. Periods of intense social struggle over space included Black migration during the 1910 and 1920s, the New Deal, and the transition from sharecropping to day labor from the 1930s through the 1950s.

To friends and family.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 18, 2002, Jim Robinson Jr. and his wife Aretha Myles Robinson stood in front of the United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, where Jim gave testimony about the hardships the Black rural community of Pinhook, Missouri had faced over the decades due to Mississippi River floods and backwater.

“I don’t know how many of you have ever been through a flood and know what it is like to have raw sewage in your home. What it is like when you get out of bed in the morning to have to wade through that mess. To have your children live in it. For them to have to ride in a tractor drawn open-wagon through the water just to get to a school bus. My people should not have to live that way year after year. If I go north to St. Louis I see fine homes surrounded by big levees, or if I go south to Memphis I see that same thing. Those people have been able to build their levees and protect their homes. I don’t want to take that away from them, I just want the same thing for us.”¹

Pinhook, a Black farming community located in Mississippi County, Missouri, adjacent to the Mississippi River, flooded periodically because there was a 1,500 foot gap in the levee. This gap was created when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began work on the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway in 1929.² The floodway, shown in Figure 1, encompasses about 130,000 acres, and was designed to accommodate Mississippi River water during flood conditions, thus lowering water levels in the main channel. It was bordered on the west by a setback levee. If backflow through the gap was not sufficient for relieving flood conditions, the Corps of Engineers reserved the right to dynamite the frontline levee in order to quickly lower levels and

¹ *Water Resources Development Issues and Corps Reforms*, Hearing Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate, 107th Cong., 2nd session (June 18, 2002) (statement of Jim Robinson, Jr., farmer).

² “United States Spillway Right is Upheld by Court,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, November 22, 1929. The construction of the Floodway was an extremely contentious political issue, and included a great deal of local opposition. Lawsuits were filed to stop the project, but in November 1929, Judge Charles B. Faris upheld the federal government’s right to claim the land through eminent domain. An article about a house fire at the home of a setback levee mechanic who had just moved to Missouri from Florida, suggests work on the levee had begun or was about to begin. “Baby Burns to Death in House,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, December 10, 1929.

prevent the devastation of Cairo, Illinois, located across the river at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.³

Pinhook was located in the floodway in 1940, because, as Robinson told Congress, “My people were not allowed to own certain lands or live in town. We were only able to purchase the land that the Mississippi River flooded. We cleared the land with our own hands with axes and mules. We built up our own community and are proud of what we have and what we have done. Pinhook is our home and it is what I want to pass along to my children and grandchildren.”⁴

The Robinsons’ experiences in Mississippi County speak to broader issues of how race and space intersected to shape Black community building and freedom struggles in the rural South during the twentieth century. For the Robinsons and other Pinhook families, the autonomy afforded by landownership, and the cooperative ethos of the community, facilitated residents’ economic survival and participation in politics and civil rights efforts. Yet, for generations, the community had to contend with the unpredictability of devastating floods, because whites prevented African Americans from purchasing land outside the floodway.

The community of Pinhook is located in the Missouri Bootheel, a six-county region comprising the northern edge of the Mississippi River delta region, or alluvial plain, as is shown in Figure 2. The term “Bootheel” came about because the portion of the state extending into Arkansas looks like the heel of a boot. Also referred to as the Missouri Delta, it includes Scott, Stoddard, Dunklin, Mississippi, Pemiscot, and New Madrid Counties. It is bordered on the west

³ Mississippi River Commission, U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, “The Mississippi River & Tributaries Project: Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway,” 1-17, <http://www.mvd.usace.army.mil/Portals/52/docs/Birds%20Point-New%20Madrid%20info%20paper%20FINAL%200426.pdf>. Pinhook incorporated in the mid-1990s.

⁴ *Water Resources Development Issues and Corps Reforms*, Hearing Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate, 107th Cong., 2nd session (June 18, 2002) (statement of Jim Robinson Jr., farmer).

by the Ozark Highlands, on the south by the Arkansas Delta, and on the east by Southern Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

During the early twentieth century, the Bootheel underwent social and economic transformations that facilitated the confluence of midwestern and southern economies and social practices. Black and white laborers, lumber companies, railroads, land speculators, landowners, and the state and federal government, all played a role in transforming “Swampeast Missouri” into some of the most fertile agricultural land in the country.⁵ Until the drainage of swamps, accomplished through the construction of over 500 miles of ditches, and the construction of levees, farming was predominately on ridges, and resembled midwestern agriculture, with corn and wheat as the primary crops. In the 1920s, a drop in wheat prices encouraged farmers to increase cotton production. The boll weevil had devastated the South, but the Bootheel was just far enough north that the insect could not survive the winter. As a result, the region became a migration destination for African Americans from the South, and to a lesser degree white farmers.

With the widespread adoption of cotton agriculture in the 1920s, the Bootheel became more firmly connected, economically, and culturally to the South. Like the rest of the rural South, most African Americans in the Bootheel made their living in agriculture, either as laborers, sharecroppers, renters, or farm owners. Sharecropping did not become the dominant system of labor in the Bootheel until the 1920s, but in other parts of the South, it emerged during Reconstruction as a compromise between African Americans, who wanted freedom from white control, and white landowners, who wanted as much supervision over their laborers as possible. Landowners were cash poor, so what emerged was an arrangement where African Americans

⁵ Bonnie Stepenoff, *Thad Snow: A Life of Social Reform in the Missouri Bootheel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 53. Thad Snow reportedly coined the phrase “Swampeast Missouri.”

farmed a family-sized unit of land, but only received the proceeds from half of their cotton crop and one-third of their corn at the end of a year. Because most families did not own equipment, or have enough cash to pay for basic living expenses, landowners would provide these items on credit, often at exorbitant interest rates, and take the expenses out of what they received for their crops at settling time. High interest rates, market prices, bad weather, and landowners' desire to keep sharecroppers on plantations meant that Black families often ended the year in debt.⁶

It was an exploitative regime, and African Americans sought landownership as the best way to achieve economic and social autonomy in the racially oppressive South. In order to improve their circumstances, African Americans often moved in search of better land, honest employers, and freedom from violence. Sometimes this migration involved short distances from one plantation to another. At other times, families made longer distance moves, enticed by labor agents or because they heard of opportunities from family and friends. Between the 1890s to the 1940s, African Americans carved out a migration path from southeastern states like Georgia and Alabama, west and northwest to the Mississippi, Arkansas, and Missouri Deltas. This migration followed the expansion of the cotton frontier.

In the 1930s, however, farming opportunities began to disappear, as New Deal legislation took farmland out of production, farm mechanization increased, small farms consolidated, and landowners switched from year-round sharecropping transitioned to seasonal farm labor. Over the course of subsequent decades, thousands of sharecroppers across the rural South were forced off plantations and became homeless. This crisis was expressed by Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) organizer and musician John Handcox:

So homeless, homeless are we:

⁶ Stewart E. Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung: African American Life on Southern Farms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 8-11.

Just as homeless as homeless can be.
 We don't get nothin' for our labor,
 So homeless, homeless are we.⁷

As a result of displacement, many farmers moved to cities in the South and North, particularly during World War II, as part of the Great Migration. Importantly, however, thousands remained in rural areas, subsisting as day laborers on plantations, if housing was available, or creating new communities in rural enclaves and nearby towns. Their struggles over space and (dis)place(ment) continued in subsequent decades, enmeshed with issues of political freedom, land, housing, and education. African Americans who were fortunate enough to own farms struggled to hold on to their land as agriculture corporatized, and federal policy became “get big or get out.”⁸

The economic and physical displacement African Americans experienced were also tied to labor and civil rights struggles. Sharecroppers and laborers were subject to eviction by landowners for individual or collective rebellion against white supremacy and the economic domination of the planter elite. In the Missouri Bootheel, in the 1930s and 1940s, Black and white farmers who joined the STFU faced displacement and violence as a result of their activities. During the 1950s and '60s, in the Bootheel and the rest of the South, economic retribution, which often spatially manifested as eviction from homes and farms, was swift when

⁷ Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1979), 347. Mitchell's book lists the song title as “Hungry, Hungry Are We,” but in other places, the title is listed as “Raggedy, Raggedy.” The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union was formed in 1934 in Tyronza, Arkansas, to fight for the rights of landless tenant farmers. By 1936 it had expanded into the Missouri Bootheel. John Handcox was one of the early organizers in the region. For more on Handcox, see Michael Honey, *Sharecropper's Troubadour: John L. Handcox, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the African American Song Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁸ Alex Cooper and Roy Cooper Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, (quote by Roy Cooper Jr.), August 4, 1998, Politics in Missouri Oral History Project, Records, C3929, SHSMO-CO.

African Americans fought for better schools, political power, and other civil rights. Physical violence was pervasive in much of the South, but less common in the Bootheel. As agriculture mechanized, landowners needed fewer laborers. When African Americans agitated for civil rights, landowners, instead of trying to keep African Americans in place by limiting their mobility, encouraged African American migration out of the South.⁹

The exploitative and violent conditions African Americans endured in the rural south, the decline of sharecropping, and the Great Migration, have led historians to focus on the decline of rural Black communities in the twentieth century, and turn their attention to the lives of those who moved to urban areas, particularly in the north. Silence surrounding African Americans' active role in shaping the built environment in the rural South has facilitated apolitical representations of poor Black communities, which in turn functions to naturalize Black poverty in the rural landscape. At the same time, narratives abound of hard working white rural families and their attendant "pioneer" histories.¹⁰ This overlooks the ways in which African Americans built and rebuilt communities, as they migrated within the rural South, and responded to transformations in cotton agriculture from the 1930s to the 1960s. As geographer Doreen Massey notes, social and economic changes do not just mark "reorganization of relations in space, but the creation of a new space."¹¹ African Americans who remained in the South

⁹ Greta De Jong, "Staying in Place: Black Migration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the War on Poverty in the Rural South," *Journal of African American History* 90, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 387-409.

¹⁰ There are many important works that explore Black urban migration. They include Joe Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Kimberly Phillips *AlabamaNorth: African American Migrants, Community and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹¹ Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labor*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Press, 1995), 4.

actively participated in the creation of new spaces, and in the process, had to contend with whites who sought to shape space to serve the interests of white supremacy.

In recent decades, the humanities have taken spatial turn, influenced by geographers and social theorists. Historians have begun to ask how space has been socially produced, and how social relations have been shaped by the spaces in which they are lived. Henri Lefebvre has been a central figure in shaping this theoretical approach. Scholars have additionally recognized that race is deeply imbricated in the production of social space, and they have interrogated not only how race is produced through spatial policies, violence, and other means of control or regulation, but also how African Americans, through community building and struggle, have shaped the local and national landscape.

Given the scholarly focus on the Black urban experience, much work on the intersections of race and space has been on cities and suburbs. Historians and sociologists of Black urban history, including George Lipsitz, Clarence Lang, Steven Gregory, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, Charles Connerly, and Andrew Weise, have looked at how race has shaped urban space and the lives of African Americans through federal policy, industrial redlining, city planning, and other realms. At the same time, these scholars have deftly shown how African Americans acted in their own interests to shape the spaces in which they lived.¹² Lipsitz, for example argues that African Americans have historically had less control over urban space than whites, and thus they have increased the use value of space by forming community solidarities. He posits that “Black

¹² Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Connerly, Charles E. *"The Most Segregated City in America": City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 10-23.

neighborhoods generate a spatial imaginary that favors public cooperation in solving public problems.”¹³ Cha-Jua reveals that African Americans in Brooklyn, Illinois, the first Black town, drew upon a proto-Black nationalist consciousness to build community and improve municipal infrastructure after they gained political power. He pays close attention to how changing socioeconomic conditions were expressed in the built environment.¹⁴

Recently, scholars such as Clyde Woods, David A. Chang, James W. Loewen, Don Mitchell, and Guy Lancaster have looked outside large cities, to probe the intersection of race and rural space in the twentieth century.¹⁵ Woods, for example, articulates twelve different stages of development in the Mississippi Delta region that were comprised of mobilizations by the plantation elite, and counter-mobilizations by African Americans. He argues that working-class African Americans developed a blues epistemology as a cultural expression and critique of race and class oppression, and emphasizes that that Black development visions, expressed through culture and politics, need to be uncovered and incorporated in regional planning.¹⁶

Historians of Black freedom struggles in the rural South have also turned their attention to the working class. Robin D. G. Kelley, Charles Payne, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Jarod Roll, and others have convincingly argued that Black laborers and farmers in the rural South were not

¹³ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 56-64.

¹⁴Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 4-9, 172.

¹⁵ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998); David A. Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Don Mitchell, *Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Guy Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, 1883-1924: Politics, Land, Labor, and Criminality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

¹⁶ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 16-39.

powerless in face of white oppression, but rather were central to grassroots labor and civil rights movements.¹⁷ These historians have broadly considered the importance of region and community space to different battles over voting, education, and labor, but they have not employed “space” as a primary analytical lens.

Place and region, on the other hand, have emerged as central topics of debate in literature on Black freedom struggles. Reconceptualization of labor and civil rights struggles is in part motivated by historians’ desire to disrupt the popular “heroic narrative” of the civil rights movement in the South, which has often been juxtaposed, by historians and the public, against a declension narrative of Black Power and violence in northern cities. Some historians, such as Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter argue for downplaying regional distinctions and moving away from “southern exceptionalism.”¹⁸ Others, such as Clarence Lang offer convincing arguments for the importance of historical place in understanding structural white supremacy and Black freedom struggles.¹⁹ The Missouri Bootheel, as a Border South region, provides an opportunity to understand the nuances of place, for it does not completely follow patterns of the North or South.

This dissertation combines and builds upon this scholarship in Black urban history, geography, and Black freedom studies, in order to ask how African Americans in the Bootheel

¹⁷ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Jarod H. Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Robin D. G. Kelley looks at forms of Black resistance in public space in later work, such as *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*; Clarence E. Lang, “Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest, and Border South in Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 371-400.

experienced space, and how they used particular spaces to further Black freedom struggles. The research questions that structure this dissertation are: (1) Why did African Americans migrate to this region, and why did many stay instead of moving to cities? What were African Americans' perceptions of this region? (2) How did changes in the landscape – particularly the expansion of infrastructure and extractive industries, the rise of cotton agriculture, and the decline of sharecropping – configure the opportunities and geographies of African American communities, and how did African Americans respond to these changes? (3) How does the character of Black freedom struggles in this rural, Border South region reshape our spatial and chronological understanding of Black freedom struggles more broadly? (4) How did whites respond when African Americans challenged white supremacy? How was this shaped by class, geography, and migration origins?

In order to fully address these questions, it is important to clarify some terminology. The term “space” can mean many things. Space is comprised of material formations such as housing and land, but it also refers to ways in which people imagine or conceptualize space, and how they interact with space. Lefebvre’s categories are useful for thinking about these spatial interactions. Spatial practice is the process by which a society “secretes” or creates space (such as a city), through the actions of everyday life. Representations of space are conceptualized space. They are created by planners, engineers, artists, or others and are expressed in architectural drawings, maps, and other material forms. Representational space is lived space, which inhabitants “seek to change and appropriate.” These different forms of “space” dialectically interact to form social space. They coalesce into systems, or landscapes, that appear “natural,” but are constructed and maintained by a range of ideologies and practices.²⁰

²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 31-3, 38-9.

Many scholars have taken up what urban scholar and theorist Edward W. Soja calls “the reassertion of space in critical social theory.”²¹ Two geographers who have influenced my approach in this dissertation are Don Mitchell and Andrew Herod. Both look at the geography of capitalism, recognizing that particular landscapes, such as the industrialized agricultural fields of California or the docks of waterfront workers, are spatially structured by employers, the state, and other powerful entities in ways that serve their own interests. Importantly, what Mitchell and Herod argue is that workers also shape the landscape in their own interests, which may conflict with employers or the state. As Mitchell argues, “social struggle makes the landscape, and the landscape is always in a state of becoming: it is never *entirely* stable.”²²

In this dissertation I analyze this struggle, and the instability of landscape, but not solely in a labor context. The geography of labor is an important part of my analysis, but I also look at intersections of the spatiality of Black community life and labor. I did not choose one particular material spatial form or imagined space to analyze over time. Instead, I looked broadly at labor and civil rights struggles in this region to see what types of spatial contestations emerged, and why they emerged when they did. This shaped the chronology of my chapters, which address themes such as rural and town violence and apartheid, migration, land, housing, and education. This allowed me to capture the breadth of spatial agency African Americans employed in a particular region, as well as the different ways in which whites attempted to exert spatial control over African Americans. In many cases, struggles over different kinds of space were interrelated. For example, in 1941, whites tried to deny African Americans access to a housing

²¹ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso Press, 1989).

²² Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, 30; Andrew Herod, *Labor Geographies: Workers and the Landscapes of Capitalism* (New York: Guildford Press, 2001), xii-8.

project in Pemiscot County. This was predicated on their perception that whites had been pioneers who labored to make the land productive. Race, and rights to the land in a particular geographical area, were intertwined. At the same time, this racial possessiveness extended to the form and quality of housing. Not only did white residents believe Black workers should not be allowed to live in the region where the housing was located, but they should not have access to good housing as long as there were whites who lived in poor quality housing.

My arguments through this dissertation also frequently refer to Black freedom struggles. In using this phrase, I am referring to a wide range of battles Africans and African Americans have fought since they were forcibly transported by whites to colonial North America and the United States. There has been a move by many scholars in recent years to extend the chronology of the civil rights movement to include 1930s and 1940s activism, and some historians have pushed movement origins back to the nineteenth century. Such early activism is considered part of a “long civil rights movement.”²³

While I understand the motivations underlying these approaches, I am in agreement with historians Clarence Lang and Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, who argue that such a chronological extension tends to elide important disruptions, such as the Cold War, as well as the significance of place.²⁴ This dissertation focuses on a variety of struggles, not all of which were part of social movements. In the Bootheel, African Americans did participate in a labor movement during the 1930s and 1940s through the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) and United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). The National Association

²³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-63.

²⁴ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265-88.

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), however, was the main vehicle of civil rights struggle in the region, and its membership and tactics were different from the labor struggle, although there was some degree of organizational overlap among African Americans. In this dissertation, I seek to understand how space has shaped the Black experience in one region, through economic and social upheavals. Black responses to these upheavals include mass protest action, but also institution-building and conservative strategies that involved working within established institutions.

In answering the research questions above, this dissertation makes three claims about the relationship between Black freedom struggles, space, and place in the Missouri Bootheel. First, white-imposed systems of rural and town apartheid shaped the geography of Black community-building and labor. In using the term apartheid, I am not attempting to make U.S. apartheid equivalent to South African apartheid. Apartheid was not as centralized and comprehensive in the U.S. as in South Africa. Yet it was pervasive and encompassed many forms of institutionalized white supremacy. Forced spatial separation, whether in labor, housing, farming, or other aspects of daily life was about power, and the determination of whites to subordinate African Americans.²⁵

When the Robinson family, and other early residents of what would become known as Pinhook, purchased land in the Bird's Point-New Madrid Floodway in the early 1940s, their ability to carry out their vision of a sustainable landowning community was constrained by the fact that they could not purchase land in other parts of Mississippi County. In fact, very few African Americans lived in the western townships of St. James and Long Prairie. As late as

²⁵ Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), xvii-xviii.

1940, Long Prairie only had twenty-eight African American residents, compared to 1,357 white residents.²⁶ This racial exclusion extended to other parts of the Bootheel.

Historians rarely think of rural areas as being segregated, yet the experience of African Americans in the Bootheel reveals that a system of rural apartheid foreclosed access to employment, land, and housing in towns, townships, school districts, and counties. In the western part of the Bootheel, in Dunklin and Stoddard Counties, the exclusion of African Americans was widespread. The Little River which bisected the region from north to south, was, for whites, a racial geographical dividing line, or “dead line.” East of the Little River there were also large areas in which African Americans were discouraged from living, particularly on prairies that were dominated by small farmers.

This is a phenomenon that is rarely examined, because in the Deep South, where African Americans comprised the majority of the population and were needed for agricultural labor, such apartheid was minimal. Yet rural forms of exclusion existed there as well, particularly when it came to landownership. As historian Valerie Grim notes, many whites in the South refused to sell land to African Americans, and “white farmers did not want African American landowners living next door.”²⁷ In 1914, Clarence Poe, editor of the *Progressive Farmer*, suggested lawmakers pass a rural apartheid law in North Carolina. He explained, “Where they desire it, our small white farmers of the South should have the right to live and build worthy homes for themselves and their children...with the assurance that the community will remain

²⁶ Ancestry.com, *1940 U. S. Federal Census*, St. James, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1940 U. S. Federal Census*, Long Prairie, Mississippi, MO.

²⁷ Valerie Grim, “African American Landlords in the Rural South, 1870-1950: A Profile,” *Agricultural History* 72, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 401.

predominately white.”²⁸ Lawmakers did not heed his advice, but in practice, in parts of the upland and piedmont South, such areas existed to differing degrees. Whites maintained such exclusionary rural spaces in other parts of the country as well, a topic that has not been fully studied.

Conflicts over rural space were heightened during three periods. The first was when African Americans migrated to the Bootheel between 1890 and 1920, to work in the lumber and railroad industries and on other infrastructural jobs. White workers tried to keep African Americans away from these jobs through night riding that targeted Black workers and white employers. The white elite was often complicit in maintaining all-white areas by refusing to hire Black labor. In a significant peonage case in 1906, a white landowning family hired Black laborers but justified holding them captive by claiming they were protecting them from the violent repercussions of local whites.

The second wave of conflict over rural territorial exclusion occurred in the early 1920s, when thousands of African Americans moved into the Bootheel to work in the newly expanded cotton fields. Whereas the number of rural industrial migrants moving up in the 1910s had been relatively small, and most stayed a short time, the migration of cotton farmers was more permanent. White sharecroppers tried to intimidate African Americans by dynamiting homes and businesses. What these two periods reveal is that regional migration within the South is important for understanding violence and exclusionary policies and practices against African Americans. Historians have largely concentrated on rural-to-urban migration, but rural-to-rural migration is significant as well.

²⁸ Gilbert Stephenson, “The Segregation of the White and Negro Races in Rural Communities of North Carolina,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (April 1914): 107-08.

During the 1930s and 1940s, whites also tried to enforce rural apartheid when the federal government attempted to establish land and housing projects for African Americans as a partial solution to the eviction of sharecroppers from plantations. The transition from sharecropping to day labor reshaped the geography of Black communities in the Bootheel, because in many cases housing was not available year-round on plantations. It affected Black and white workers, but because of the system of racial apartheid mentioned above, African Americans faced greater difficulty in finding places to live. They also had fewer alternative employment options for supporting themselves in the off-peak agricultural seasons, because of racial discrimination in hiring, and reduced access to transportation.

The federal government intervened in this crisis, and one solution officials employed was the establishment of land and housing communities for Black and white displaced workers. This process of “resettlement” threatened white patterns of racial exclusion, prompting resistance from working- and middle-class whites. African Americans, claiming their rights as citizens, fought for access to government land and housing. In most instances they were successful, but at least one housing project was abandoned by the government because of white opposition.²⁹

Many of the Black rural communities that exist today, then, came about as a result of political struggle, and there were many more communities that were planned but not realized. It is important, then, to recognize the absence of the abandoned projects, for the absences, and the existence of many all-white rural landscapes today, are a result of historical and persistent spatial

²⁹ “East Prairie Club Objects to FSA Project,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), January 29, 1942; “Two Houses and Barn Destroyed on Colony Site,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), February 5, 1942; “East Prairie Men Tell FSA Officials Objections to Colony,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), February 5, 1942. The Farm Security Administration’s Sugartree project would have been similar to existing group housing projects for Black laborers, but whites opposed the project because it was in an area that had been historically white, and because it was cooperative in nature. The opposition was voiced by elite whites in near East Prairie, but they claimed there was widespread opposition.

inequalities. The aforementioned conflicts over race and rural space were publicly debated because of associated white violence and Black resistance, but many rural exclusionary practices flew under the radar and shaped the fortunes of African Americans, such as the residents of Pinhook, Missouri, for generations.

At the same time that whites were attempting to impose and maintain rural apartheid, they were imposing systems of segregation in towns, mirroring efforts across the country. In towns near the Mississippi River, where African Americans had lived for generations, whites used control over real estate, social pressure, segregation and zoning ordinances, and lynching to spatially assert white supremacy. In newer towns created after the Civil War, whites used policies and social pressure to segregate African Americans, but often it was after discussions about whether they would become a “negro town” and allow African Americans to live within their city limits.³⁰

A second claim of this dissertation is that African Americans, in the process of community building and resisting white supremacy, brought their own visions of rural and town planning to bear on the development of the Bootheel. In particular, many maintained a desire for a sustainable agrarian life. These visions came to life through the construction of churches, homes, and entire communities, over the course of the twentieth century. This dissertation argues that African Americans’ spatial agency and activism in the Bootheel, in the midst of the decline of sharecropping and corporatization of agriculture, transforms the narrative of Black rural community decline. As historian Vernon Burton has noted, residents of rural communities, even as they faced economic and social upheavals, have held on to pride of place through community activism. Individual and group identities are shaped by particular places, and places

³⁰ Editorial, *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, June 13, 1919.

are sometimes seen as family legacies. Jim Robinson Jr. expressed this when he said he wanted to pass Pinhook (and its associated meanings) to his children and grandchildren.³¹

African Americans created planning and development visions for building communities and shaping the spaces in which they lived. Traditionally, these terms are associated with the predominately white planning profession that emerged in the Progressive era, obscuring the role that African Americans and other marginalized groups have played in determining the form and use of space. This dissertation argues that it is critical, then, to uncover “insurgent planning histories” that have been marginalized or silenced.³²

In the Bootheel, the transition of sharecropping to day labor prompted some African Americans to establish municipal enclaves adjacent to existing cities, or establish separate housing projects or landowning communities. These examples of rural community planning were, on one hand, shaped by systems of rural and town apartheid described above. Systems of apartheid, exclusion, and discriminatory distribution of resources were employed by local white citizens and by different levels of government. Yet their power was not absolute, and African Americans imagined and built spaces that fulfilled their own agendas. In a predominately white region, building all-Black towns or enclaves facilitated racial solidarity, self-defense, survival, and self-governance. This practice of building Black communities represented a form of proto-

³¹ Orville Vernon Burton, “Reaping What We Sow: Community and Rural History,” *Agricultural History* 76, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 631-58.

³² Quote taken from Leonie Sandercock, ed. *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2. See also Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested*, 4; Angel Nieves and Leslie Alexander, “We Shall Independent Be”: *African American Place-Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 3; Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” *Journal of Urban History* 21 no. 3 (March 1995): 296-346; Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*; Lipsitz “The Racialization of Space,” 10-23. Representations of space were not just conceived by professionals, but were also created by everyday citizens. For example, Jim Robinson Jr. created his own blueprint to build his house in Pinhook.

nationalism, or “an ensemble of political attitudes that represent racial solidarity or a commitment to Black empowerment by organizing Blacks into autonomous organizations, institutions, and communities.”³³

These communities reveal the sense of social and cultural connection African Americans had to the South, and their desire to live outside the city. They also point to the extent to which agrarianism has endured as a vital strand of Black rural life in the South. This is reflected in the establishment of communities like Pinhook, but also in recent events. In 1997, Timothy Pigford and other Black farmers filed a class-action lawsuit against Dan Glickman, U. S. Secretary of Agriculture, in order to get restitution for decades of discrimination by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farmers Home Administration (FHA). It resulted in one of the largest class-action settlements in civil rights history, and organizations like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives continue to fight for the rights of minority farmers. Landownership remains important not only to African Americans still actively farming, but also to family members who have moved to urban areas, and have chosen to rent their land rather than sell. Many hold on to land because of the sacrifices their parents or grandparents made in order to obtain it, and the memories they have of how it sustained them during their childhood. Stories of family ownership and loss are passed from one generation to the next.³⁴

³³ Cha-Jua, *America’s First Black Town*, 3.

³⁴ Gary R. Grant, Spencer D. Wood, and Willie J. Wright, “Black Farmers United: The Struggle Against Power and Principalities,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 1 (March 2012): 3-22; Zoia Martin, interview by Heidi Dodson, Cape Girardeau, MO, June 18, 2012, interview U-0849, Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [hereafter cited as SHC]; Charlene Gilbert, *Homecoming: The Story of African American Farmers* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000); Charlene Gilbert, *Homecoming: Sometimes I am haunted by Memories of Red Dirt and Clay*, DVD (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1999); Federation of Southern Cooperatives, <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/>.

Historians have tended to assume that with the onset of the Great Migration, African Americans abandoned their desire for land and a rural life, and sought factory jobs that opened up in defense industries in northern and western cities. Families like the Robinsons, and their friends Louis and Fannie Moss, however, migrated in search of land as late as 1943, when they moved with their children from Tennessee to Missouri. James Moss recalls that his father never considered moving to the city. “Leaving never entered his mind - farming was what he did.” James also stayed in the Bootheel, even though he did not farm. He tried living in the city, but it was “too busy for him.”³⁵

The Border South: Black Freedom Struggles and Place

Finally, this dissertation argues that Black freedom struggles in the Bootheel were significantly shaped by the region’s Border South location and characteristics. African Americans took advantage of the fact that white racial attitudes in the region could be contradictory or unpredictable. For example, as described earlier, in some areas whites sought to completely exclude African Americans from towns and larger rural areas, which followed practices of the Upland South and Midwest, while in other areas the white elite recruited Black labor, albeit into southern systems of Jim Crow and labor control. African Americans capitalized on fissures and fluidities in labor practices, segregation, politics, and other arenas, in their push towards economic and social equality.

³⁵ James Moss, interview with Heidi Dodson, Charleston, MO, June 27, 2012, interview U-0850, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

Historian Clarence Lang argues that Border South histories are important because they "illustrate the simultaneous instability and concreteness of regional distinctions," and he positions a state like Missouri as "a transitional place where both northern and southern political economies, migration, and immigration patterns, and modes of black racial control and black politics merged, often prefiguring shifts in the rest of the nation."³⁶ The Bootheel, as the southernmost part of the state of Missouri, exhibited an "in-between" character, but because of its cotton-based economy, leaned even closer to the rest of the South than much of the state.

Migration patterns during the nineteenth century, and slaveholding along the Mississippi River, first established the Bootheel's southern character. Geographer John Hudson studied migration origins of the "Middlewestern Frontier" by looking at birthplace data for the late nineteenth-century Midwest.³⁷ He found that "The Ozark Highland and Mississippi Valley lowlands of southern Missouri were settled largely by persons born in the Nashville Basin of Tennessee," and their parents had been born in the Piedmont of North and South Carolina. Another place of migration origin was in Eastern Tennessee. This migration stream also extended into the southernmost part of Illinois and a small part of south-central Indiana. Enslaved African Americans moved with their owners to the Bootheel, often leaving behind family in the Eastern United States.

In the rest of Missouri, north of the Ozarks, migration origins were most closely associated with Virginia and the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky. Other parts of the Midwest

³⁶ Lang, "Locating the Civil Rights Movement," 371, 374.

³⁷ John C. Hudson, "North American Origins of Middlewestern Frontier Populations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78, no. 3 (September 1988): 395-413. Hudson's birthplace data is limited to that of relatively prominent white men, so it has class, gender, and racial biases, is in that it is taken from county histories, which are largely written about white, prominent men. It is still instructive, however, for understanding cultural influences.

were destinations for white migrants from Pennsylvania, New York, and New England. While many parts of Missouri, such as the St. Louis area, and a stretch of counties along the Missouri and Mississippi River, were greatly influenced by German and other ethnic migration, the Bootheel was minimally affected and more closely resembled the white ethnic homogeneity of other parts of the rural Deep South.³⁸

John H. Fenton, who studied politics in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Maryland, found similar migration patterns. He notes that the collision of southern and northern migration streams “along the northern reaches of the Border States, created in the mid-nineteenth century a cultural condition analogous to the meeting of cold and warm masses of air.” Fenton’s analysis showed that in 1870, non-native Missourians in the Bootheel came primarily from Tennessee, with the exception of Mississippi County, where Kentucky or Virginia migrants dominated. Within the Bootheel, slaveowners settled predominately near the Mississippi River, and small farmers dominated ridges and prairies west of the river.³⁹

Migration between 1880 and 1910 expanded to include white farmers and laborers from Indiana and Illinois, and laborers from the hill country of Kentucky and Tennessee. Thad Snow, a white planter and Indiana transplant, recalled that from 1905-1915, midwesterners, particularly from Northern Illinois, “were charmed by the rich black soils and persuasive land agents.” As a result, “They added a strong Northern spicing to the social hodgepodge which theretofore was

³⁸ German migration did affect the northern part of Scott County, which is reflected in the names of some of the towns, such as Dielstahdt and New Hamburg. The German influence extended north through Cape Girardeau and other counties along the Mississippi River, to St. Louis. It is also important to point out that while the majority of the population of rural Deep South regions, like the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas, were comprised of native-born whites and African Americans, other ethnic groups such as Italians, Syrians, and Chinese lived there as well, albeit in small numbers. Mexicans also moved into the area with the advent of the Bracero program.

³⁹ John Fenton, *Politics in the Border States: A Study of the Patterns of Political Organization, and Political Change, Common to the Border States – Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri* (New Orleans, LA: Hauser Press, 1957), 1, 8-9, 155-60; C. O. Sauer, “Geography and the Gerrymander,” *American Political Science Review* 12, no. 3 (August 1918): 403-26.

definitely of a Southern flavor.” At the same time, a small number of African Americans moved to the area from surrounding states, and then from the Deep South in search of rural industrial jobs. In the 1920s, there was a massive migration of African American farmers from the Deep South, along with a smaller migration of whites.⁴⁰ In 1923, “Swampeast Missouri ‘went South’ almost overnight.”⁴¹

Throughout these population shifts, one of the most critical differences between the Missouri Bootheel and the Deep South was the fact that African Americans could vote. In this way, the Bootheel more closely resembled the Midwest, where African Americans “experienced electoral manipulation and domination, rather than outright voter exclusion, as the norm.”⁴² In the Bootheel, as in St. Louis, to a certain degree a system of clientage developed whereby African Americans could vote as a bloc. However, the ability to do this was limited to Black landowning communities, such as St. Paul and Pinhook. St. Paul was an all-Black rural voting precinct in Dunklin County, and politicians from both parties courted their vote.⁴³ Politicians also visited Pinhook. Pinhook residents did not necessarily vote as a bloc, but community leaders like Jim Robinson Sr., his son, Jim Robinson Jr., Lommie Lane, and Louis Moss, met with politicians, researched the issues, and made recommendations as to who would best serve their interests. They also helped transport Black voters to the polls.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Fenton, *Politics in the Border*, 1, 8-9, 155-60; Sauer, “Geography and the Gerrymander,” 409-12.

⁴¹ Thad Snow, “Background of Missouri’s Cotton Workers’ Problem Which Led to the Roadside Demonstration,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1939, f. 19, box 3091, Harold Harwell (H. H.) Lewis Papers, SEMO; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 52-53.

⁴² Lang, *Locating the Civil Rights Movement*, 380.

⁴³ Alex Cooper and Roy Cooper Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, August 4, 1998.

⁴⁴ Jim Robinson Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, October 26, 1998, Politics in Missouri Oral History Project, Records, 1996-, (C3929), MSHS-CO.

The ability of Black voters to shape politics was limited, however, by the fact that like much of the rural South, the Bootheel was dominated by the Democratic Party.⁴⁵ Most African Americans were Republican, and this did not substantially shift until the 1930s, when a small group of middle-class professionals embraced the Democratic Party in the hopes of getting a share of New Deal benefits. Within the state of Missouri, Democrats in cities like St. Louis sought the Black vote, but this cooperation was slow to develop in rural areas like the Bootheel.⁴⁶

On plantations, voting in the Bootheel was unusual in comparison to much of the South and Midwest. There was no voter registration, so rather than restrict the Black vote through poll taxes or other means, politicians tried to inflate it by paying African Americans and taking them to multiple polling sites. For many sharecroppers, the extra cash was much needed. The degree of intimidation from landowners is difficult to gauge, but the reality was that Black voters might be evicted if they did not vote the way a landowner wanted. It was laborious and potentially dangerous for African Americans scattered on plantations to organize.⁴⁷

The transition of sharecropping to day labor, then, was significant because many day laborers moved into town, or moved into all-Black housing communities. This increased the concentration of the Black vote and provided a measure of safety. Physical violence against Black voters was uncommon, but it did occur, sporadically, particularly in the 1920s. Economic

⁴⁵ Fenton, *Politics in the Border States*, 157. Fenton analyzed presidential elections between 1872 and 1952. In the Bootheel, nearly all counties voted Democratic in all but two out of twenty-one elections. Despite the Democratic solidarity, there were probably divisions within the region. Small farmers who populated much of the land away from the Mississippi River, were probably Jacksonian Democrats, and large landholders were Bourbon Democrats. There was some Whig influence in New Madrid County before the party dissolved.

⁴⁶ "Missouri 'Dems' to Hold Meet. Elaborate Program Planned, Political Leaders to Discuss Vital Issues," *Plain Dealer* (Kansas City, KS), August 18, 1933; "Shannon Will Speak at Fall Negro Confab," *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, August 18, 1933.

⁴⁷ Will Sarvis, "Black Electoral Power in the Missouri Bootheel, 1920s-1960s," *Missouri Historical Review*, 95, no. 2 (January 2001), 182-202.

retribution was most commonly used to intimidate Black voters. As Chapter Four explains, middle-class and elite whites also tried to exclude African Americans from rural areas where they wanted to maintain the dominance of the Democratic Party. As a result of these factors, voting rights did not take center stage in Black freedom struggles as it did in the Deep South. Instead, economic independence and education were the foci of struggles.

Complete political freedom was often contingent on economic independence. The system of sharecropping in the Bootheel meant the region resembled the Deep South, but certain modifications, I argue, placed it in the category of Border South. As Lang has observed, Missouri was a border State because it was not dependent on a one-crop economy, like cotton, or sugar. Agriculture in the Bootheel was truly a mix of northern and southern, because it encompassed the convergence of different climatic zones. It was touted by regional promoters as an agricultural Garden of Eden because northern and southern crops could thrive: corn, wheat, cotton, soybeans, rice, melons, alfalfa, and more. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, farmers primarily grew corn and wheat. Cotton was produced in Dunklin County and parts of the river counties, but it was a small amount compared to the Deep South. The amount of cotton grown did begin to increase in the early twentieth century, however, and it exploded in the 1920s. Still, despite the widespread influence of cotton from the 1920s on, agricultural diversity inhibited, but did not prevent, the presence of large-scale plantation agriculture.

Crop production shaped labor systems. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in areas where corn, wheat, and truck crops were grown, farm laborers were more prevalent than sharecroppers. It was in the 1920s with the spread of cotton production that farm tenancy skyrocketed, although a system of tenancy had developed in the 1910s based on land-clearing. For African Americans, one of the attractions of the Bootheel was the fact that

plantation agriculture was not as firmly established in the region and developed there relatively late. It expanded rapidly, but many landowners who started growing cotton in the 1920s had little experience with the crop. The system of armed overseer surveillance, common in the Deep South, was rare in the Bootheel, and in many cases sharecroppers had more control over day-to-day farming decisions and the distribution of family labor. This was facilitated by the fact that many landowners were absentee owners.⁴⁸ These freedoms had a significant impact, improving quality of life.

The region's agricultural economy, the absence of cities, and the widespread system of sharecropping, meant that there was little diversification in the class structure of Black communities. There was a small Black middle class in some of the larger towns like Charleston and Sikeston, which consisted of ministers and teachers who had more than an eighth grade education, and a larger, steadier income than farmers. It also included a small number of business owners, who did not necessarily have a substantial amount of formal education, but who had more economic independence and income than sharecroppers or laborers. The size of the middle class was quite small in the early twentieth century, but it increased during the 1920s and 1930s as a result of migration, improvements in state education funding, and the expansion of Black high schools.

There were many teachers and ministers in rural areas, but their educational and economic status placed them closer to the working class, even though their positions garnered a great deal of community prestige. Often, rural ministers' main source of income was sharecropping. Teachers in rural schools were often women who became eligible to teach when

⁴⁸ Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, Ashtabula, Ohio, September 30, 2012.

they finished the eighth grade. In some cases, rural teachers had a high school education, but this varied widely by location. There was also a very small landowning class in the Bootheel, but for most of these farmers, their economic position was tenuous. It was common for farmers to go up and down the agricultural ladder.⁴⁹ A handful of Black farm families owned substantial acreage, and could be considered part of the middle class economically, but this was unusual.

Migration and the Bootheel's border location shaped not only agriculture and Black class structure, but also the regional orientation of African Americans' social and organizational ties. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, before the migration of Black farmers from the Deep South, family and kinship ties were more oriented toward the Upper South and the Lower Midwest, compared to later years. This reflects the fact that, as sociologist Jack Blocker has shown, African Americans from the Upper South moved to towns in the Lower Midwest between 1860 and 1910, before the Great Migration to cities like Chicago. In the 1890s, for example, residents in New Madrid sent community reports to the *Indianapolis Freeman* newspaper. These reports largely reflected the activities of a small middle class, that could afford to travel to visit family or go to school. Visits to family included places like Bloomington, Illinois, and Columbia, Missouri. Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) churches were common in the Bootheel, and they were members of the Southeast Missouri and Illinois Annual Conference.⁵⁰ Fraternal organizations were prolific in the region. Some, like the Mosaic Templars had origins in the South and spread north to Missouri. Others, like the

⁴⁹ Orville Vernon Burton, "African American Status and Identity in a Postbellum Community: An Analysis of the Manuscript Census Returns," *Agricultural History* 72, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 213-230; Robert Tracy McKenzie, *One South or Many?: Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-era Tennessee* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ The abbreviation C.M.E. originally stood for Colored Methodist Episcopal, but in 1954 was changed to Christian Methodist Episcopal. "The History of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church," Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.thecmechurch.org/history.htm>.

International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, originated in Missouri and spread southward. It was not unusual for African Americans in the Bootheel to attend regional meetings in St. Louis, or in the case of the Mosaic Templars, Little Rock, Arkansas.⁵¹

After the migration of the 1920s, African Americans' social ties shifted to the Deep South. Newspapers frequently reported trips to visit family in Arkansas and Mississippi. Over the course of the next few decades, however, family connections to cities like Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis grew (and ties to small midwestern towns decreased), as families, particularly younger generations, participated in the Great Migration. The Bootheel, in this way, exemplifies the transitional character Lang indicates was indicative of Border South states. The Bootheel was a migration destination for farm families moving from the Deep South, but also a launching point to northern cities for African Americans who had resided in the region for generations.

The Bootheel's location in the Border South also influenced national organizational assistance with Black freedom struggles. St. Louis organizations, like the Urban League and NAACP involved themselves in the region during different crises, such as the 1939 sharecropper demonstration, the lynching of Cleo Wright, and the implementation of New Deal projects. Predominately white philanthropic, religious, and educational entities, like the Committee to Rehabilitate the Sharecroppers, the Delmo Housing Corporation, the Episcopal Diocese, and Washington University, all centered in St. Louis, had been involved in the region. The involvement of these Black and white organizations, and their publicizing of different struggles in the *St. Louis Argus* and *Post-Dispatch*, contributed to the mitigation of extreme white violence, which was typical of more isolated locales like the Mississippi Delta.

⁵¹ Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008), 1-12; "New Madrid, Mo.," *Indianapolis Freeman*, August 20, 1892; "C.M.E. Conference Convenes at St. Paul Church," *Chicago Defender*, November 6, 1915.

The STFU, headquartered in Memphis, was a significant organizing force in the 1930s. It too, drew the attention of northern allies to the conditions of Black and white laborers in the Bootheel, which is reflected in the letters Governor Lloyd Stark received in support of a sharecropper demonstration in 1939. During the 1930s, Black and white sharecroppers cooperated within the STFU. During the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, however, I have not discovered any local white organizations that directly assisted Black civil rights efforts. Preliminary research of the late 1960s suggests there was some Black and white cooperation during the War on Poverty, but that topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation. There were also efforts between Black and white Baptist organizations to improve race relations and communication in the 1950s.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) each had brief involvement in the Bootheel. On May 6, 1961, fifteen Black and white members of the St. Louis and Columbia CORE chapters rode the bus to Sikeston as a “pilot project” for the Freedom Rides in Deep South states. They were arrested for disturbing the peace. In August 1962, SNCC organizers working in Cairo crossed the river to Charleston, to take part in demonstrations and sit-ins, which were designed to pressure the state of Missouri to pass a public accommodations law. The NAACP, however, has been the primary Black protest organization in the region from 1940 to the present. This distinguishes the region from the Deep South, where the NAACP was violently suppressed and even outlawed. Still, African Americans could potentially face economic retribution for belonging to the NAACP. Teacher Preston Heard recalled that local whites considered the NAACP a Communist organization, and membership might prevent someone from being hired in the school system. He joined the NAACP, but as with his membership in the National Education Association, which was

considered more radical than the Missouri State Teachers' Association, he had to conceal it from local officials, or at least not be seen publicly supporting the organization.⁵²

In a sense, Heard's experience typified white supremacy in the Bootheel. African Americans did not face violent repression to the same extent as their family and friends in the Deep South, but economic retaliation was ever present. At the same time, retaliation was inconsistent and varied according to employer, place, and even interpersonal relationships. There was always a degree of unpredictability regarding the ways in which whites would react to Black activism and assertions of citizenship. Although the nature and frequency of white oppression could vary, there was never any doubt that whites thought African Americans should be subordinate to them in social and economic relations. This, along with other characteristics discussed, clearly distinguished the Bootheel from the Midwest. As historian Ashley Howard points out in her study of Midwest urban rebellions, this was one of the changes Black southerners noticed when they moved north. In the Midwest, whites might pretend to embrace Black equality, and even pass laws to protect equality, but true feelings and actions could contradict outward appearances. In the South, however, African Americans always knew what their "place" was supposed to be, according to whites, even as they challenged this hierarchy.⁵³

If Missouri is a Border South state, the Bootheel can be seen as the southernmost part of the state, not only geographically, but economically and culturally. The region, despite its southern turn in the 1920s, has remained on the margins of the South yet has also been considered an outlier in Missouri. This was expressed by New Madrid politician and landowner

⁵² "'Hard Core' States Targets of Student Crusaders," *Call and Post* (Cleveland, OH), May 6, 1961; Alvin Adams, "Why Race Violence Moves North: Whites' Last Ditch Flight," *Jet*, 6 September 1962, 16-18; Preston and Bonnie Heard, interview by Heidi Dodson, Wyatt, MO, January 23, 2013.

⁵³ Ashley Howard, "Prairie Fires: Class, Gender, and Regional Intersections in the 1960s Urban Rebellions," (unpublished manuscript, March 10, 2016), Microsoft Word file.

J. V. Conran, who noted that “Southeast Missouri is a part of the South and is not wanted by the South. It is a part of Missouri and not wanted by Missouri.”⁵⁴ Because of the region’s mix of northern and southern influences, Fannie Cook, a St. Louis progressive who became involved in helping sharecroppers after the 1939 roadside demonstration, noted that Southeast Missouri was the “sixth finger on the hand of the South.”⁵⁵ This in-between location has probably facilitated the region’s independent colloquial identity as the “Bootheel.” While this term did not become popular until the mid-twentieth century, as early as the 1910s land and business promoters advertised the region as a place in between the North and the South.

I explore regional contradictions of the Bootheel, and how they shaped African Americans’ experience, over six chapters. Chapter One analyzes how rural racial apartheid and white working-class vigilante violence shaped African American employment between 1890 and 1922. I show that Black workers were kept out of many lumber and railroad jobs, particularly west of the townships along the Mississippi River. Moreover, hiring patterns in the railroad industry shifted from northern practices to southern practices, illustrating the instability of this Border South region. In Chapter Two, I examine racial apartheid, Black community building, and white violence in towns during the same period as Chapter One. I reveal that in older towns near the Mississippi River, race relations were more southern than midwestern. During the 1910s, many African Americans, particularly women, transitioned from living in white homes to “living out,” which gave them more control over their lives and work. African American men found higher-paying wage work in lumber mills and factories in town, and the Black population in towns increased due to migration. Spatially visible Black neighborhoods grew through the construction of churches and

⁵⁴ Will Sarvis, *J. V. Conran and Rural Political Power: Boss Mythology in the Missouri Bootheel* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2012), 11.

⁵⁵ Dominic J. Capece Jr., *The Lynching of Cleo Wright* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 4.

other institutions. The white elite and middle class resented what they perceived as the growing assertiveness, criminality, and insubordination of African Americans. In order to maintain racial control, whites lynched six Black men in or near the county seats along the Mississippi River, and nearly lynched several other men.

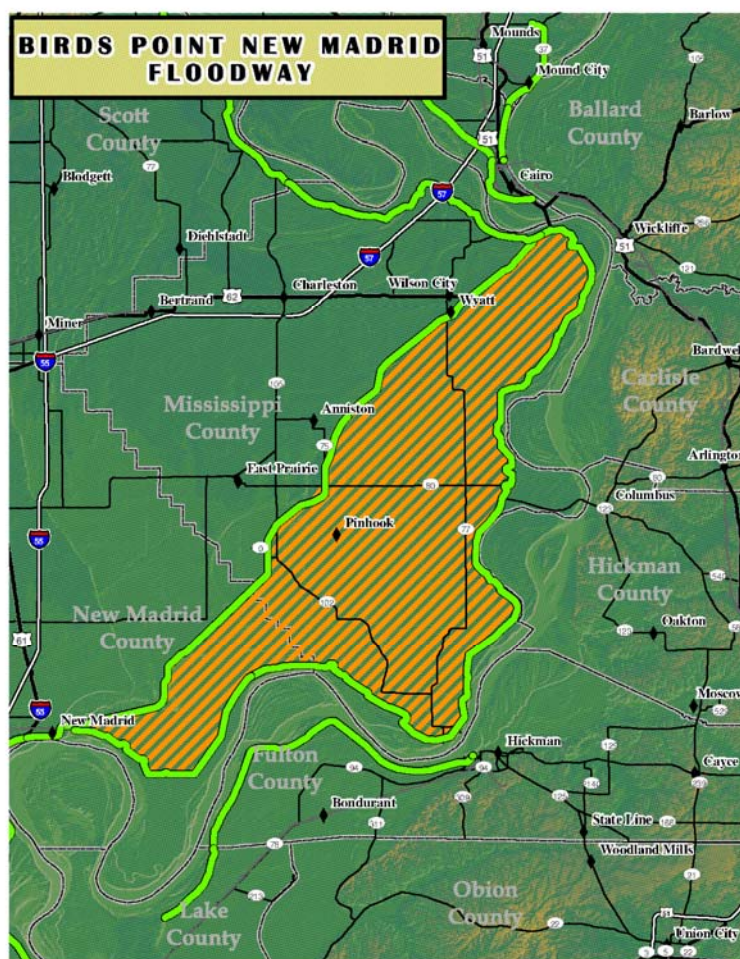
In the 1920s, the Bootheel's adoption of cotton as a main crop transformed the region, and in Chapter Three I discuss the migration of more than 15,000 African Americans from the Deep South to the Bootheel. I examine the origins and motives of the migration, as well as African Americans' perception of the region, and their actual experiences. One of the motivations for migration was the dream of landownership, and in Chapter Four I analyze how African Americans collectively pursued ownership through a range of organizations, such as the National Federation of Colored Farmers (NFCF), New Madrid County Colored Farm Homestead Subsistence Association, and Christian Era Association. This chapter stresses the enduring importance of Black agrarianism in the twentieth century, and some of the factors that influenced land ownership in the Border South.

Landownership was out of the reach of most Black farmers, and as agriculture mechanized, even sharecropping began to decline as employers shifted to hiring seasonal day labor. This displaced thousands of farmers across the South. Homelessness was particularly acute in the Bootheel because it had been a migration destination in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1939, sharecroppers, many of them members of the STFU, staged a roadside demonstration. One of the federal government's responses to this crisis was to establish experimental, permanent housing projects for Black and white laborers. Chapter Five describes Black workers' battles to gain access to decent housing, and argues that living in government projects simultaneously inhibited and facilitated Black activism.

As agricultural job opportunities declined, and civil rights activity increased nationwide, African Americans in the Bootheel turned their attention to fighting for access to quality education through the NAACP. I argue that Black ownership of home and land was also important in facilitating educational struggles, because African Americans had more economic independence. This chapter looks at the battle residents of North Wyatt, one of the federal housing projects, waged in order to get a public school in the 1940s. It then looks at the long struggle for school desegregation, from 1954 to 1968, in which African Americans faced “grudging compliance,” from whites, rather than massive resistance.

Introduction Figures

Figure 1. This map shows the location of Pinhook in the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway, in Mississippi County, Missouri



Source: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers,
http://www.mvm.usace.army.mil/publicaffairs/News/press_releases/bpnm/BPNM_Map.pdf

Figure 2. This map shows the outline of the Bootheel, or Missouri Delta, as part of the larger Mississippi Alluvial Plain



Source: Adapted from Kbh3rd, Mississippi Embayment relief map, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_embayment#/media/File:Mississippi_Embayment_relief_map_2.svg. The outline of the Bootheel was added to the original map, which is made freely available under a Creative Commons license.

CHAPTER 1

THE RURAL GEOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LABOR AND WHITE VIOLENCE,
1890-1922

In the summer of 1890, African Americans employed by the St. Louis, Arkansas, and Texas Railway started working on track that ran through New Madrid and Dunklin Counties in the Missouri Bootheel. It was not long before local whites started throwing stones at them while they were working during the day and while they were in their sleeping car at night. Samuel H. West, a representative of the railroad, tried to get an injunction against the entire population of these counties, but the judge said this was too broad. According to the injunction application, “the inhabitants of the counties named have a prejudice against the colored race.”⁵⁶ The St. Louis, Arkansas and Texas Railway, which was acquired by the St. Louis Southwestern Railway, or Cotton Belt, in 1891, ran from Bird’s Point, Missouri, on the Mississippi River, in a southwesterly direction through Arkansas and into Texas. Malden was one of the major stops in Dunklin County, not far from New Madrid County, and it was probably in the vicinity of Malden where the stoning took place.⁵⁷

This series of attacks against Black railroad workers was part of a larger pattern of rural whitecapping and nightiding⁵⁸ by whites against African Americans, and in some cases white

⁵⁶ “Stoning Negro Laborers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 18, 1890.

⁵⁷ Jacob E. Anderson, “80 Years of Transportation Progress: A History of the St. Louis Southwestern Railway,” *Cotton Belt News*, October 1957, Texas Transportation Archive, http://www.ttarchive.com/Library/Articles/Cotton-Belt_80-Years-Progress.html#3

⁵⁸ The terms whitecapping and night riding are often used interchangeably, but some scholars have argued for distinctions between the two. Jarod Roll, in *Spirit of Rebellion*, argues that whitecapping was a form of vigilante violence that targeted Black farmers and farm laborers, and “did not involve white inter-class conflict.” Night riding sometimes targeted African Americans laborers or farmers, but employers or corporate interests were also targets. Roll distinguishes between different types of night riding that were place specific, such as night riding in the Missouri Bootheel, which was a form of working-class vigilantism, and night riding in the Black Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee, where the perpetrators were landlords fighting against tobacco trusts. While I think it is important to distinguish between violence that only targeted African Americans and that which included African Americans and

employers, that took place in the Bootheel between 1890 and 1922. This labor violence not only prevented African Americans in the Bootheel from accessing employment opportunities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it also played a central role in the creation and maintenance of sundown towns and territories, some of which persisted into the late twentieth century. Sundown towns were white municipalities that did not allow African Americans to live within town limits, and in some cases within a couple miles of town. White residents enforced this exclusion through violence, refusal to sell or rent property to African Americans, and in some cases, town ordinances. In the Missouri Bootheel, exclusion was geographically expansive, including all-white townships, and nearly all-white counties.⁵⁹

Labor violence against African Americans, and the creation of sundown areas, also took place in other parts of the Midwest, and in places in the South where African Americans were a minority of the population. In 1898 and 1899, for example, white miners in Pana and Virden, Illinois used violence to repel Black miners from Alabama, recruited by mining companies to function as strikebreakers. The companies decided not to honor wage increases that had been agreed upon as a result of a United Mine Workers strike the previous year. On October 13, in Virden, a gun battle erupted between white miners and guards on a train hired by mining operators. About seven white miners and five guards were killed, and several Black miners on

whites, I think whitecapping involved inter-class conflict among whites, even if that conflict did not take a violence form. For example, William F. Holmes, in his article on whitecapping in Georgia, notes that in Houston County, the white working class targeted a well-to-do Black farmer and Black farm laborers, and that the white planter and business class came to their aid. He uses the terms whitecapping and night riding interchangeably. Moreover, whitecapping has also historically referred to white attempts to punish or expel whites for a variety of perceived transgressions. In short, more research into the historical use of these terms is needed, as well as more theorization on the nuances of vigilante violence. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use the term night rider and night riding. See William F. Holmes, "Whitecapping in Georgia: Carroll and Houston Counties, 1893," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Autumn 1980): 388-404; "Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi, 1902-1906," *Journal of Southern History* 35, no. 2 (May 1969): 165-85.

⁵⁹ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 3-5, 76-77, 99-100, 106-107, 380.

board the train were injured. In April 1898 in Pana, gunfire between Black and white miners ended with casualties on both sides. Ultimately, mine owners in both towns gave into the demands of white workers, and Pana and Virden became sundown towns, which meant Black families were run out of town and excluded from living there from that point forward.⁶⁰

Another example of racially motivated labor violence occurred in the Upland South. In 1894, in Black Rock, Arkansas, on the edge of the Ozarks in Lawrence County, African Americans who worked in the lumber mills and factories were threatened by night riders who ordered them to leave and demanded that mill owners fire their Black employees. Some employers complied and others refused to give into the night riders' demands. About a third of the Black population left town. Those who remained continued to face violence, and by 1920 Black Rock had become a sundown town, which meant African Americans could no longer safely live there. Historian Guy Lancaster notes that African Americans had also been threatened in other parts of Lawrence County. Indeed, night riding was "particularly prevalent in northeastern Arkansas."⁶¹

Violence against African Americans was national in scope, but its timing, form, and geography were shaped by local conditions.⁶² In parts of the Midwest, Border, and Upland

⁶⁰ Victor Hicken, "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars of 1898," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1959): 263-278; John H. Keiser, "Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 65, no. 3 (Autumn 1972): 313-26; Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 157-61.

⁶¹ *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, s. v. "Black Rock (Lawrence County)," by Guy Lancaster, last modified December 29, 2015, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>; Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing*, 55-56; "Blacks Ordered Out: White Caps Organize in Arkansas and Post Notices to Negroes," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), January 17, 1894.

⁶² According to historian Rayford Logan, "the nadir of race relations," a period when African Americans throughout the country experienced a rise in violence and oppression, in response their economic, social, and political challenges to white supremacy. See Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1965; repr., New York: De Capo Press, 1997), xxi-xxiii, 361-372; David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-16, 67-86.

South, racial violence emerged when white employers, using race management strategies, recruited African Americans to areas that had previously been all-white or predominately white.⁶³ In some unionized places, such as the mines in Pana and Virden, employers used African Americans as strikebreakers. In other cases, employers, like the St. Louis Southwestern (Cotton Belt) Railway, hired African Americans because they could pay them lower wages, thus inflaming white racial animosity and discouraging interracial organizing. This was a deliberate strategy on the part of employers, which historians David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch discuss in *The Production of Difference*. In predominately white places with strong anti-Black prejudice, these employer strategies frequently resulted in violence against African Americans.⁶⁴

The Missouri Bootheel during this early period provides an opportunity to look more closely at geographies of economic opportunity and violence in a Border region that encompassed traditions of exclusion associated with the Midwest and plantation paternalism of the South. Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the exclusion of African Americans from suburbs and urban neighborhoods, but have paid less attention to rural exclusion, and expulsion, in parts of the South with small Black populations. Sociologist James W. Loewen's work on sundown towns draws attention to racial exclusion in upland areas like the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks, the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee, and the Appalachian Mountains. While

⁶³ David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-16, 67-86.

⁶⁴ Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 3-16, 67-86. In some parts of the country, such as Texas, Mexicans or Mexican-Americans became the target of white animosity. In the Missouri Bootheel, however, very few families of Mexican heritage lived in the area until the 1940s and 1950s. The 1930 census there were fourteen individuals enumerated, and in 1940, only one person remained. It is possible that more Mexican farm laborers came through the Bootheel during the 1930s, but did not stay long enough to be enumerated in the census. Most workers came after the Bracero Program was established between the U.S. and Mexico in 1942. Even though there were not many people of Mexican heritage in the Bootheel in the 1930s, prejudice against them was present. In 1939, Bell City, in Stoddard County, Missouri, passed a series of resolutions designed to keep African Americans and Mexicans from living in town, or in the northeastern part of the county.

the Missouri Bootheel is adjacent to the Ozark foothills, it is delta land traversed by a handful of fairly low ridges.⁶⁵ Guy Lancaster, in *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, 1883-1924*, argues that scholars have neglected parts of the South that were not hill country, but that experienced night riding and the expulsion of African Americans. These predominately white areas, like Stoddard and Dunklin Counties in Missouri, and Clay, Greene, and Craighead County Arkansas, were geographically part of the Mississippi delta alluvial plain, not the Ozark Highlands.⁶⁶ They were, however sandwiched between Upland areas and delta areas with large Black populations.

Regional differences were tied to broad tendencies in terms of the type of violence whites used against African Americans. For example, lynching was most prevalent in the South, where whites relied on Black labor and where slavery had been a significant part of social and economic life. This was particularly true in areas with large Black populations engaged in sharecropping. In contrast, white-instigated riots that were intended to expel or exclude African Americans from particular jobs and geographical areas, were more common in the Midwest and parts of the South with small Black populations.⁶⁷

Understanding rural violence during this period is critical, for it shaped the geography of Black communities and patterns of exclusion in subsequent decades, affecting African

⁶⁵ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 76-77; William F. Holmes has written about whitecapping in Georgia and Mississippi. See "Whitecapping in Georgia," 388-404; "Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi," 165-185; Elliot Jaspín also discusses violence against African Americans in the South in *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

⁶⁶ Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing*, 1-2.

⁶⁷ Despite this broad pattern, it is important to recognize that lynching also occurred outside the South. See Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898," *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 5 (July 2000): 591-629; Michael J. Pfeifer, ed. *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013). At the same time, there were certainly race riots in the South in areas with large Black populations, such as the Atlanta riot of 1906. Scholars have created databases to account for lynchings across space and time. A similar database for race riots and night riding is needed. James W. Loewen is compiling data on sundown towns.

Americans' access to employment, land, housing and education. Because violent conflict was in response to African Americans' search for economic opportunity and the free exercise of citizenship rights, these incidents also open a window onto rural Black freedom struggles. African Americans lost many of these battles in all-white areas, and thus the incidents have been overlooked because many of these landscapes remain white today, obscuring the history of Black struggle. It is also important to interrogate this history of violence and spatial exclusion, because it is a form of racial apartheid. The public is often taught about racial apartheid, or segregation, in terms of African Americans' exclusion from living in certain parts of town, or specific institutions and public spaces, such as libraries and restaurants. Sundown towns and rural territories are a form of apartheid on a larger geographical scale.

Scholars of Black freedom struggles have begun to theorize place and region, in order to understand how they influenced Black agency and white oppression. The Border South, as historian Clarence Lang argues, highlights "simultaneously the instability and concreteness of region distinctions." This chapter illuminates this instability both geographically and temporally.⁶⁸ It illustrates how the region's Border South characteristics were central to the geography of African American opportunity and exclusion in three ways. First, it will show the contested nature of sundown areas through an analysis of where Black workers accessed rural industrial employment, their response to violence and exclusion, and how the geography of opportunity changed over time. Second, using specific instances of white violence against Black workers, it will look at how the white elite and professional class created and reinforced

⁶⁸ Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1-15; Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 265-88; Lang, "Locating the Civil Rights Movement, 371-400; Aldon D. Morris, "Towards a New Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement," *Issues in Race & Society: An Interdisciplinary Global Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 34-51. Tracy Elaine K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945 - 1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

boundaries of racial exclusion through regional marketing and racialized rhetoric about landscape and labor. The white working class used night riding to threaten African Americans, and their migration origins in predominately white areas in other states also shaped their vision of who belonged in the Bootheel. Finally, this chapter will consider patterns of Black migration, the identity of workers, and the opportunities they sought when they moved into the area.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Missouri Bootheel was a migration destination for Blacks and whites because the swamp-laden region was in the process of being transformed into productive farmland. Railroads forged paths through the lowlands and lumber camps, mills, and associated factories spread throughout the region, offering new employment opportunities. After lumber was harvested, companies and large landowners hired workers to clear the land, cutting out the leftover stumps and digging drainage ditches. White migration to the area was much higher than Black migration, but between 1900 and 1922, African Americans started moving from other parts of the South in greater numbers. This early migration, through social networks, facilitated the large migration of about 15,000 African Americans in 1923.⁶⁹

Land clearing and the expansion of the railroad and lumber industries in this border region led to closer economic and social connections between North and South, East and West. The Bootheel was a place of confluence and conflict, as different groups looked to the region as a “Modern Promised Land.”⁷⁰ Most African Americans had for generations lived in townships near the Mississippi River, but as rural industrial jobs opened up further west, they moved into all-white areas to take advantage of jobs that paid more than farm labor.

⁶⁹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 11-26, 52-53; Bonnie Stepenoff, “‘The Last Tree Cut Down’: The End of the Bootheel Frontier, 1880-1940,” *Missouri Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (October 1995): 61-78.

⁷⁰ C. F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., *The Modern Promised Land*, Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, 1910-ca. 1920, SEMO.

In this chapter I argue that white collective violence in rural areas during this period was primarily in response to African Americans seeking jobs in industries and geographical areas they had not previously occupied in this region. Most of the workers who experienced this violence had migrated from further South, often in response to employer recruitment. The perpetrators of violence were largely, but not exclusively, members of the white working class who saw African Americans as economic competition. Yet the violence was also tied to the historical and persistent exclusion of African Americans from particular rural regions, especially the western part of the Bootheel. In these cases, even if the white elite did not directly employ violence, they condoned it and sanctioned exclusion.

Sociologist James W. Loewen has argued that in some cases, a particular instance of labor conflict caused an area, or town, to “go sundown” during the Nadir.⁷¹ There were, however, also jurisdictions that had long been sundown, or were sundown from their inception, and residents then employed violence to maintain this status. The Bootheel tended to follow the latter pattern. White residents living in rural territories where slavery had a minimal presence, had for generations excluded African Americans, and the labor-related violence and exclusion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century embodied attempts to maintain these boundaries of exclusion, although economic tensions at times raised the propensity for violence.⁷²

Violence against African Americans in the Bootheel was part of a broader pattern of

⁷¹ Loewen’s use of “nadir” refers to Rayford Logan’s argument about the “nadir of race relations,” a period when African Americans throughout the country experienced a rise in violence and oppression, in response to their economic, social, and political challenges to white supremacy. In Logan’s original publication in 1954, he designates the end of the nadir as 1901, but he expands it in the 1965 edition, and discusses the “tug-of-war” of losses and gains in the early twentieth century. See Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1965; repr., New York: De Capo Press, 1997),.xxi-xxiii, 361-372.

⁷² Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 33-81, 157-163; Leon Parker Ogilvie, “Development of the Southeast Missouri Lowlands” (PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1967), 236-245.

night riding and whitecapping that extended from northeast Arkansas into Southeast Missouri during the early twentieth century, as seen in Figure 3. In the color version of this map, red markers indicate violence against Black laborers in Arkansas, and the yellow and green dots indicate violence in the Missouri Bootheel. Geographically, African American exclusion was most prevalent west of a “dead line” that was physically demarcated by the Little River, which roughly bisected the Bootheel from north to south. This line continued south into Arkansas. The counties near the Mississippi River had been largely settled by whites from the Upper South states of Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, including a number of slaveowners. Landholdings were larger. Further west, farms were smaller, and areas were settled primarily whites from the Upland South, particularly Tennessee, who were not slaveowners and who did not want to hire African American labor. Between 1880 and 1910, a significant number of whites from Illinois and Indiana also moved into the region.⁷³

African Americans’ responses to violence and exclusion varied, and in some cases are difficult to uncover, but they included self-defense, migrating out of an area, or moving into places with established Black populations. Regardless of their particular responses, Black families shared their knowledge of geography and opportunity in the region with family and friends further south, facilitating chain migration. Oral histories with African Americans who moved to the area for farming opportunities in later decades reveal that they had heard about opportunities from family who had migrated before them for jobs in the lumber industry or agriculture.

⁷³ Ogilvie, “Development of the Southeast,” 236-45; Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 76-77; Hudson “Middlewestern Frontier Populations,” 395-402, 400-13; Sauer, “Geography and the Gerrymander,” 409-12.

Laying Track across the Wilderness: The Geography of African American Railroad Employment

It was along railroad tracks in the 1890s that African Americans first encountered white rural violence associated with the expansion of industry in the Bootheel. Railroad development in Missouri was rapid beginning around 1850, but in the Bootheel, the swampy topography and lack of capital and government subsidies inhibited significant building in the region until the 1880s and 1890s. There were only two major lines that crisscrossed the region by the 1870s. The first railroad constructed was the Cairo and Fulton. It was supposed to extend from Bird's Point, across from Cairo where the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers came together, to Fulton, Arkansas on the Texas border. By 1860, however, it only extended to Sikeston and it was not until 1873, after it was purchased by a group who owned the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway (Iron Mountain), that it reached Poplar Bluff. The Iron Mountain started in St. Louis in 1851, but did not reach the Bootheel until 1869. By 1874, the Iron Mountain extended from St. Louis down to the Arkansas state line, running through some of the Ozark counties, and a branch from St. Francois County ran southeast to Belmont, Missouri, located on the Mississippi River in Mississippi County, just across the river from Kentucky. These two rail lines intersected in Charleston, Missouri in Mississippi County. This railroad network was limited, but it provided access to markets outside the region and began to reduce dependency on the Mississippi River for transportation.⁷⁴

African Americans made up a substantial portion of the railroad workforce in the United States. Nationally, there were 128,000 African Americans in 1910 who primarily worked as

⁷⁴ Joel P. Rhodes, *A Missouri Railroad Pioneer: The Life of Louis Houck* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 57-61; Ogilvie, "Southeast Missouri Lowlands," 35-44.

section hands and common laborers in the South. Many more worked in the North as Pullman porters. However, despite nineteenth century construction of rail lines in the Bootheel, and the intersection of major lines in Charleston, a town with a significant Black population, African Americans were largely shut out of railroad employment in this region. Access improved closer to the turn of the century, but this industry that for many was a path to the middle class in the South and in northern cities remained out of reach for most Black workers in the Bootheel, reinforcing their dependence on agriculture and service jobs.

The limited access African Americans had to railroad work in part reflected its in-between location at the border of North and South. In the South, Black workers made up a significant percentage of railroad work. In most cases they were limited to positions as section hands, which meant building and repairing track, but in some cases they were firemen and brakemen. In the North, African Americans were generally limited to service positions as porters.⁷⁵

The state of Missouri in the late nineteenth century followed the northern hiring pattern most closely, with most African American railroad workers hired as porters. In the early twentieth century, despite national hostility on the part of white railroad workers, African Americans in Missouri obtained a significant number of positions as section hands, as well as porters. A small number held operating positions like firemen or brakemen. The number of operating positions remained low compared to the rest of the South. A survey done by the Missouri Negro Industrial Commission for 1921-1922 reported 2,701 Black steam railroad

⁷⁵ Howard W. Risher Jr. and Marjorie C. Denison, *The Negro in the Railroad Industry*, Report No. 16, The Racial Policies of American Industry, Industrial Research Unit, Department of Industry, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1971), 2-3; Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-2.

laborers, but only 8 brakemen, 24 locomotive firemen, 11 switchmen and flagmen, and 300 laborers in the car and railroad shops. This survey was limited by the number of responses, but it shows the huge discrepancy between common laborers and more advanced operating positions. In the South as a whole, African Americans occupied a much larger proportion of this sector, holding a majority of brakemen and firemen positions on the Gulf Coast lines, the southern division of the Illinois Central, the Southern, the Louisville & Nashville (L&N), and other lines.⁷⁶

The Bootheel largely mirrored trends statewide, and thus exhibited a midwestern character with regard to hiring patterns. These patterns, however, were complicated by episodes of violence that were triggered by white fears of Black economic competition and longstanding practices of geographical exclusion of African Americans from sundown areas. Resentment of Black labor in specific situations, and the wholesale exclusion from certain territories or towns, often worked synergistically. African Americans' access to railroad jobs as section hands and other positions increased by the turn of the century, but they remained concentrated in the eastern part of the Bootheel because of exclusion in western parts.

The 1880 census only provides a snapshot of Black railroad labor at this time, but it reveals the dominance of white railroad workers in this early period, and the relegation of African Americans to service positions. In Charleston and Bird's Point, in Mississippi County, two hubs of railroad activity, nearly all the railroad employees were white, with many born in the Northeastern United States (New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, and Maine) or in countries like Ireland, Germany, Canada, and Denmark. The majority of European workers came from

⁷⁶ Robert S. Cobb, comp. *Biennial Report of the Missouri Negro Industrial Commission*, 1921-1922 (Jefferson City, MO), 63-65; Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 24-25.

Ireland. A similar pattern existed in Liberty Township in Stoddard County in the western part of the Bootheel. All but three white railroad employees were from Ireland.

This was typical of the Midwest, where European immigrant laborers made up a substantial portion of the railroad industry work force, particularly as section workers, some of the hardest, most dangerous work. According to historian Eric Arnesen, “native-born white workers avoided section work at all costs,” leading employers to turn to immigrant and African American labor. Mississippi County, and in fact most of the Missouri Bootheel, did not have significant resident white ethnic populations, except for a small German population; most of the region’s residents had migrated from the upper South. The European workers at Bird’s Point and Charleston were probably brought in by the railroad from other work locations further north. The fact that they permanently resided elsewhere is reflected the fact that all the white railroad workers in Charleston were married, including thirteen from Ireland, but most were boarders and did not have their family living with them.⁷⁷

Only two Black railroad employees were enumerated in Mississippi County. Charles A. Miller, age 50, from Tennessee, and William H. Porter, age 35, from Georgia, were porters in the town of Charleston. They were married and their families were living with them. They were porters at the depot, which meant their job was to help passengers board the train and handle baggage. They did not travel across the country working in the sleeping cars as the Pullman porters did. Most Pullman porters during this period lived in northern cities, even if they were recruited from the South. Still, railroad employees were able to make better wages than farm laborers, and in many larger urban communities they formed part of the growing Black middle

⁷⁷ Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 6-7; Ancestry.com, 1880 U. S. Federal Census, Ohio, Mississippi County, MO; Ancestry.com, 1880 U. S. Federal Census, Liberty, Mississippi, MO.

class. The depot porters in Charleston, although few in number, would have garnered prestige within the Black community. At that time, there were about 200 African Americans in Charleston, which had a little over 1,000 total residents. Black workers like Charles A. Miller and William H. Porter were not perceived by whites as economic competition because they held service positions, and thus did not face the same level of violence as Black workers who held section worker or operating positions.⁷⁸

By 1900, the demographics of railroad work had shifted in the Bootheel. As railroads expanded in the region, linking North and South, African Americans were slowly hired in non-service positions, and in many cases were viewed by whites as an economic threat. At the same time, the white work force, including section hands, became predominately white native workers rather than European immigrants. In a few cases, these white workers had parents from Ireland, but most had native-born parents, and were from Missouri and the surrounding states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Illinois.⁷⁹

Sources suggest that African Americans obtained their first non-service railroad positions on short feeder lines operated by local entrepreneur Louis Houck before some of the larger lines hired Black workers at the turn of the century. Houck, nicknamed the “father of Southeast Missouri,” lived in Cape Girardeau just north of the Bootheel, but was originally from a German community in Mascoutah, Illinois, near Belleville. He eventually settled in Cape Girardeau, and on 1881 he embarked on his first railroad venture, an attempt to complete a small fifteen mile feeder line connecting Cape Girardeau to the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern (Iron

⁷⁸ Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, Charles A. Miller, Charleston, Mississippi, MO, p. 18; Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, Wm. H. Porter, Charleston, Mississippi, MO, p. 13; Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 24; Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 1-2, 10.

⁷⁹ Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, Ohio, Mississippi, MO.

Mountain) at Delta. While Houck was the most prolific builder, early railroad development in the Bootheel reflected a similar pattern where local entrepreneurs, attracted by land grants (often swampland grants) by counties seeking railroad development, built small lines which were eventually absorbed by larger companies. Houck sold his lines to the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway (Frisco) in 1902.⁸⁰

It is possible that African Americans were hired out as slaves, before the Civil War, to build the Cairo and Fulton, or that they worked on the Iron Mountain branch near Belmont, Missouri, but manuscript censuses from 1870 only enumerate white railroad workers. In 1881, Houck hired Black workers, likely recruited locally from the Cape Girardeau or Commerce area, to cut white oak and cypress trees and repair the existing disintegrating trestles on his first railroad building attempt. Historian Joel Rhodes notes that they were hired for their skill in cutting hardwoods, implying that this was a task African Americans were frequently employed to do in this forested region. However, this may also have been a situation where white employers justified hiring African Americans for the most physically demanding, lowest paying jobs, by ascribing them certain skills based on racialized ideas of African Americans' fitness for particular forms of labor. When working for Houck, the crew of Black workers labored ahead of another crew of white men who followed, building new track. These men were recruited from the hill country north of Cape Girardeau. For both crews, this was uncomfortable, frustrating work given the swampy, humid conditions of an area that was dense with hardwoods and undergrowth, but Black workers had the worst of it, being sent ahead to clear out the most difficult obstacles.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ogilvie, "The Development of the Southeast," 56-58; Rhodes, *Louis Houck*, 58-61, 69-73.

⁸¹ Rhodes, *Louis Houck*, 69-73; Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 6.

By 1890, main rail lines extended from Missouri down into Arkansas and Texas. Just as some railway companies brought white workers from the north to work in the Bootheel, others brought in Black workers from further south. This was likely the case in the stoning of Black railroad workers described in the opening vignette of this chapter. The St. Louis, Arkansas and Texas Railway was a southern railroad, headquartered in Texarkana. It was common for African Americans to work as railroad laborers in Texas and Arkansas, thus it is not surprising that the company brought in Black section hands to work on the northern extent of their track in 1890. Because this type of work was mobile and temporary, workers slept in railroad cars at their work location or at a nearby town. Whether the railroad company, or the Black workers, had an inkling about the violence they would face in Dunklin and New Madrid Counties is unknown. The fact that the railroad representative wanted to file an injunction against all residents of both counties implies that the company had run into trouble before.⁸²

On one hand, the violence against Black railroad workers may have been triggered by difficult economic conditions. This was a tense time for railroad workers and farmers. Working conditions and wages for the railroad workers had declined, and major strikes on the lines owned by railroad magnate Jay Gould took place in 1885 and 1886. In the Bootheel, Gould owned the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway. At the same time, farmers were resentful of rising freight rates, one of the grievances that informed the populist movement, that had a significant presence in the Bootheel. Commodity prices were low, exacerbating economic stress. Whether the attackers of the St. Louis, Texas, and Arkansas employees were white railroad workers or simply local residents, they resented seeing African Americans holding these jobs,

⁸² *Handbook of Texas Online*, s. v. "St. Louis, Arkansas and Texas Railway," by Chris Cravens, published June 15, 2010, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook>.

because they thought they should be given to white workers. Seeing African Americans working for railway companies that white farmers thought were causing them economic hardship also would have fueled their anger.⁸³

On the other hand, whites in Dunklin, Stoddard, and parts of Scott and New Madrid Counties had a history of excluding African Americans, even during periods of economic stability. Large swaths of the region were effectively sundown jurisdictions. The stoning of Black railroad workers, then, was not simply a reaction to perceived economic competition, but an enforcement of pre-existing racial boundaries. Excluding African Americans from jobs was not just a way to protect white access to employment; it was also a way to prevent African Americans from living and establishing communities in these areas. Historian Guy Lancaster found a similar pattern in Arkansas. In some cases, whites kept out industries that would have hired African Americans, even though it meant fewer jobs for whites. This exclusion was rarely codified in official ordinances or laws, but it was based on informal community consensus and tradition.⁸⁴

In the case of Dunklin County, such practices were informal but widely enforced. Louis Houck, the railroad entrepreneur who hired African Americans to work on his first rail line in 1881, ran into this opposition in 1897 when he hired African Americans to repair track on the St. Louis, Kennett, and Southern Railroad, which ran between Kennett, in Dunklin County, and

⁸³ Theresa A. Case, "The Radical Potential of the Knights' Biracialism: The 1885-1886 Gould System Strikes and Their Aftermath," in *Texas Labor History*, eds. Bruce A. Glasrud and James C. Aarony (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013): 86-8; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 237-282; For an understanding of Black populism, see Omar H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1900* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); Leon Parker Ogilvie, "Populism and Socialism in the Southeast Missouri Lowlands," *Missouri Historical Review* 65 (January 1971): 159-183.

⁸⁴ Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing*, 45.

Caruthersville, in Pemiscot County. Houck recruited workers locally and these workers may have been hired near Caruthersville in Pemiscot County, unlike the St. Louis, Arkansas, and Texas workers. Still, he ran into opposition from “the old moss-backs of Dunklin County,” because he had violated countywide “prejudicial ordinances” that prohibited hiring African Americans.⁸⁵ Although Houck was a well-known figure in regional development, in this case he was an outsider who had violated local tradition. Prominent whites in Dunklin County claimed the right to decide who could and could not work in what they perceived of as their territory.

The 1890 violence that Black workers experienced, and the opposition they faced near the Dunklin and Pemiscot County borders, were not isolated events, but part of a larger pattern. Six years later, in 1902, there was conflict between Black and white workers in Scott County, near Benton. They were doing maintenance on the “Peavine,” track, which was also a Houck railroad. There were about twenty-five white workers and twenty-five Black workers, who had been recruited from Commerce, located in eastern Scott County along the Mississippi River. Commerce was the locus of Black community life in Scott County, with 401 African Americans living in the township. Moreland Township, the site of Benton, was immediately west of Commerce Township, but only eight African Americans lived there, most of whom were servants in Benton.⁸⁶

The railroad crew working near Benton was not segregated. The white workers harassed the Black workers, hurling insults, and in response the Black workers requested a separate foreman. The two crews worked separately from that point forward, but when it started raining,

⁸⁵ Editorial, *Cape Girardeau (MO) Democrat*, May 8, 1897; Rhodes, *Louis Houck*, 154.

⁸⁶ Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, Commerce, Scott, MO; Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, Moreland, Scott, MO.

members of both crews took shelter under a shed near the depot. The white workers again harassed the Black workers. The Black workers chose not to respond, and eventually most of the white workers went into Benton for a break. One man returned early and warned Jim Jackson, Tom Brassfield, and Mann Rodes [Manuel Rhodes] that the white workers were getting together a mob in Benton to run them out of the county. The white workers came back and forced a confrontation at the water pump, threatening the Black workers and throwing bolts at them. The Black workers ran to escape the assault, but one turned and fired two shots, hitting one white man in the knee and another in the calf. Jackson, Brassfield, and the others then had to figure out how to get back to Commerce safely; they had come to work via handcar and the white workers had blocked the track with their cars. Some went to Benton and sought protection, others hired private transportation, and the Sheriff gathered a posse to guard others.⁸⁷

In this conflict, Black workers strategically tried to avoid conflict with white workers by requesting a separate foreman and refusing to verbally engage white insults. When conflict became unavoidable, however, one of the Black workers used armed self-defense to make sure he and the other workers could get away. Because the Black workers were recruited from the town of Commerce, eight miles away from Benton, they were probably aware when they took the job that they were entering a potentially dangerous situation, and thus came armed. However, newspaper articles from the Bootheel also reflect the fact that it was common for Blacks and whites to arm themselves in this rural region, which had a reputation for all types of violence, not just racially motivated incidents.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ "Two Men Shot: A Race War between Railroad Hands near Benton," *Scott County Kicker* (Benton, MO), August 30, 1902; Irvin G. Wyllie, "Race and Class Conflict on Missouri's Cotton Frontier," *The Journal of Southern History* 20, no. 2 (May 1954): 190.

⁸⁸ Sarvis, *J. V. Conran*, 44-45; "Mississippi Valley Notes," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, June 25, 1895.

Most likely, Brassfield and the other Black workers from Scott County did not return to work on the Peavine the next day. Thus, because of white hostility they were forcibly excluded from an economic opportunity that may have significantly aided family support, home or land ownership, and other forms of mobility. In fact, Tom Brassfield was widowed and had five daughters and two granddaughters to support.⁸⁹ The workers were already at an economic disadvantage because they had to commute from Commerce. African Americans continued to bear this transportation burden throughout the twentieth century, when they worked in a sundown area but were not allowed to live there.

The harassment and attack by white railroad workers against Black workers, was tied not only to economic competition, but also to a desire to establish, or reinforce, racial hierarchy within the mixed crew. Historian Paul Michel Taillon has shown that one way railroad workers in the running trades, such as engineers and firemen, asserted their racial superiority was through the exclusion of African Americans from their unions. After the turn of the century, these men went even further and tried to expel African Americans from the fireman and brakeman positions they held in the South. White workers associated African Americans with moral degeneracy, laziness, and indolence. “The existence of black firemen and brakemen gave credence to whites’ fears that firing and braking was indeed ‘nigger work’ and that they might in fact be ‘slaving like niggers.’”⁹⁰ David R. Roediger, in *Wages of Whiteness*, delineates the historical process by which white workers developed a race-conscious class identity, when they increasingly measured their freedom and independence as white workers against the conditions of enslaved men and

⁸⁹ Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, Thomas Brassfield, Commerce, Scott, MO, p. 14A.

⁹⁰ Paul Michel Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men: Railroad Brotherhoods, 1877-1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 32-33, 57-59.

women, and after the Civil War, African American freedmen and women. “Chattel slavery stood as the ultimate expression of the denial of liberty. But republicanism also suggested that long acceptance of slavery betokened weakness, degradation, and an unfitness for freedom. The Black population symbolized that degradation.”⁹¹ This sentiment continued into the twentieth century. In the case of the Benton, Missouri violence, the workers were section hands, not members of the running trades, but their less prestigious positions made them even more determined to distance themselves from African Americans.

Violent incidents over railroad jobs were the first manifestations of a larger battle over jobs and territory that continued into the twentieth century in the Bootheel, as industrialization opened up new jobs in areas that had previously been all-white, and linked North and South. The railway lines, as sites of Black employment and mobility, were seen by local white residents as transgressions of all-white rural spaces and white economic prerogatives. Long-term, coordinated resistance by African Americans to this violence was difficult because the work being done was often in temporary and isolated locations, with few, if any, African Americans living nearby. Because workers had no ties to communities in these places, workers frequently decided to seek other employment. However, when their lives were threatened, they often fought back.

After 1902, violence against Black railroad workers abated, but the locus of anti-Black violence shifted to lumber and land-clearing jobs. The sheer scale of these enterprises and the desire of large landowners and companies to recruit Black labor made it difficult to enforce racial territorial boundaries compared to railroad employment. Conflict led to uneven employment opportunities.

⁹¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 66.

Lumber and Land Clearing

The expansion of the lumber industry in the Bootheel went hand in hand with the expansion of the railroad. Sawmills needed a way to transport their lumber and railroads needed business on their tracks. The proliferation of these enterprises opened up new job opportunities for African Americans and provided a higher-paying alternative to agriculture, but in the early years, like railroad jobs, they were restricted to locations along the Mississippi River. West of this area, Black workers often faced violence and exclusion, leading to an uneven landscape of economic opportunity. It was through jobs in the lumber industry, however, that the racial exclusion of certain sundown areas was breached. Some employers, such as the Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company, located in all-white Anderson Township in New Madrid County, caved to white violence and threats after initially hiring Black labor, and hired only whites until sometime during the 1920s. Others, such as the Wisconsin Lumber Company, a subsidiary of International Harvester, had a substantial Black work force at lumber operations in the villages of Deering, in Pemiscot County, and Rives, in Dunklin County. In the early 1930s, the Wisconsin Lumber Company also sold land to a significant number of African Americans in a rural community that was later named Gobler.⁹²

⁹² Frances Starks, "Gobler's Black Heritage," *Deering Plantation: Sixty Thousand Acres in the Bootheel of Missouri*, ed. Ophelia R. Wade (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 1999), 167-168; Paul Harrison and Irene Neel Burns, "The Town and Post Office of Gobler," *Pemiscot County Missouri Quarterly* 2 no. 2 (October 1976): 154-155. Gobler was originally a segregated Black and white rural community in Pemiscot County, located along the Cotton Belt Railroad, but over time it became associated with African American farmers. According to local histories, the first African Americans moved to the area in 1930, from Arkansas and Mississippi. They purchased 640 acres (a section) of cutover and uncleared land very cheaply. Plat maps from 1930, and deed indexes suggest the land they purchased was in the same area as land owned by the Wisconsin Lumber Company. In January 1930, the company announced it was ceding 57,000 acres to the state of Missouri, so it is possible Black farmers purchased land from the state. "Wisconsin Lumber Company Cedes 57,000 Acres to State of Missouri," *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), January 10, 1930.

It was in the 1890s that the lumber industry substantially expanded in the Bootheel. Companies headquartered in the Midwest realized fortunes could be made harvesting cypress, white oak, and other hardwoods in this delta region of Missouri, as well as in Arkansas and Mississippi. For decades, companies like International Harvester had been focused on the northern forests of the Great Lakes region, but that supply dwindled by the late nineteenth century. The hardwoods harvested in the Bootheel were used for the production of farm implements, and other products like boxes, barrel heads and staves, rail ties, handles, and even egg cases.⁹³

Many of the lumber companies that located in the Bootheel had origins in the Midwest. Isaac Himmelberger, for example, had a sawmill in Logansport, Indiana, and expanded into Stoddard County, Missouri around 1879. The company opened another location at Morehouse in New Madrid County in 1890, and then in 1895 the company merged with the Luce lumber family of Ohio, which owned several hundred thousand acres in New Madrid County, forming the Himmelberger-Luce Land and Lumber Company, which later became Himmelberger-Harrison after W. H. Harrison bought most of the Luce portion. The Pemiscot Land & Cooperage Company was formed by Jacob Weirman of Pennsylvania and Ohio and John Worst of Fremont, Ohio. The Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company was formed in Decatur, Indiana by brothers William P. and M. S. Anderson, along with several others, including Frank E. Gideon of McGill, Ohio.⁹⁴

⁹³ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 15-17; "Labor Troubles," *Twice-A-Week Democrat* (Caruthersville, MO), May 6, 1921. The Dillman Egg Case Company employed African Americans and whites in Caruthersville.

⁹⁴ Descriptive overview, Himmelberger-Harrison Lumber Company Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University, http://library.semo.edu/archives/collections/Finding%20Aids/Himmelberger-Harrison_Papers/CSS/H_and_H_Descriptive_Overview.htm; Pemiscot Land and Cooperage Company Records, HPC; Ancestry.com, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, "Jacob Weirman," Harris Township, Ottawa, Ohio, p. 21; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "Jacob Weirman," Little Prairie Township, Pemiscot, Missouri, p. 11B; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "John W. Worst," Fremont Ward 1, Sandusky, Ohio, p. 8A; Information

The lumber boom in the Missouri Bootheel was taking place throughout the South, and the associated camps and mills hired African Americans in significant numbers. In the United States, by 1890, 17,276 African Americans held jobs in sawmills. By 1900 the number working at sawmills and planing mills was 33,266, an increase from 12.5 percent of total industry employment to 20.6 percent. The biggest increase in numbers occurred between 1900 and 1910, with 111,223 African American employed in the latter year. Many of these jobs were in the pine forests of the South, particularly in the coastal plain of the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. The industry in the Bootheel did not include pine, but yielded lowland hardwoods like oak, hickory, and cypress. Like in other industries, Black lumber workers were often relegated to the most physically demanding, dangerous, and lowest-paying jobs, lumped together in the category “laborer” or “saw mill worker.” This was particularly true in the early years and in camps located away from the saw or planing mills. By 1910, however, African Americans comprised 14 percent of operating positions and 6 percent of craftsmen.⁹⁵

Although the lumber industry in the Bootheel did not substantially grow until the 1890s, along with the expansion of the railroad, in 1880 there were some local sawmills, especially near the Mississippi River. African Americans were employed at these mills because they were located in areas with longstanding Black communities. For example, Nelson McElmurry, a steam engineer from Virginia, and Jesse Hedgeman, a teamster from Louisiana, worked at Bird’s Point, in Mississippi County, across from Cairo, Illinois, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Another sawmill was located in the town of New Madrid. Most of the Black

sheet, Gideon-Anderson Lumber & Mercantile Company Papers, 1901-1938, R290, SHSMO; “Gideon, 1900-1986,” <http://gideon.k12.mo.us/town/box.htm>

⁹⁵ John C. Howard, *The Negro in the Lumber Industry*, report no. 19, Industrial Research Unit, Department of Industry, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 26-28.

lumber employees in these river locations were from Missouri or the surrounding states of Kentucky and Tennessee, but others had migrated from more distant locations.

McElmurry and Hedgeman's lumber jobs in 1880 were a step up from where they had been ten years before. In 1870 they were farm hands, which was the predominant form of agricultural labor in the Bootheel. That year, Jesse and his wife Ida lived in the same house with Nelson and Mahalia, suggesting a family connection or close friendship that endured for the next decade, when the two men remained neighbors and sought lumber employment together. By 1900, Nelson McElmurry had died and Mahalia moved across the river to Cairo, Illinois, where she was the head of the household for her extended family, making a living as a washerwoman and taking in boarders.⁹⁶ Cairo, at that time, was larger than Charleston or New Madrid in Missouri, and was a place where a widowed woman could find more business to support herself and her family. There is no documentation about how Nelson McElmurry died, but the lumber industry was a dangerous job and the climate of swampy Bootheel meant diseases like malaria were common. In 1900, Jesse Hedgeman was a day laborer, representative of the fact that for many, lumber work was temporary, and individuals cycled between jobs as rural industrial workers, day laborers, farm laborers, and farmers. This was particularly true if a worker was not willing to move to a new location after lumber in a certain area was harvested.⁹⁷

In contrast, white sawmill workers, like the white railroad employees, largely had Northern and European roots, although some workers were from Kentucky and Tennessee. In

⁹⁶ Ancestry.com, *1870 U.S. Federal Census*, "Nelson and Mahalia McElmurry," Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 7; Ancestry.com, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, "Nelson and Mahala McElmurry," and "Jesse and Ida Hedgeman," Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 10; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "Mahalia McElmurry," Cairo, Alexander, IL, p. 13.

⁹⁷ Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "Jesse and Ida Hedgeman," Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 14B; William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 19-22.

1880, the sawmill foreman near Bird's Point was from Saxony (Germany) and several workers were from Ireland, England, Germany, and Canada. John Peppard was born in Ohio. He was living with his brother James, a farmer, who was born in Wisconsin, and his mother, Anna, who came from Vermont. John's fourteen year-old brother also worked in the mill, but he was born in Missouri, indicating the family had moved to the state some time before or during the Civil War. Patrick Clune was from Ireland, his wife from Ohio, and their three children were born in Missouri.⁹⁸

By 1900, African American employment in the lumber industry had expanded southward to Cottonwood Point, on the Mississippi River in Pemiscot County, where there was an existing Black community. However, Black workers were shut out of jobs that had begun opening up in the interior swamps and hardwood forests of the Bootheel. Figure 4 shows the racial and geographical patterns of lumber employment in the region, based on manuscript census data from a sample of townships. "X's" mark areas of Black and white lumber employment. "O's" mark white-only operations. In New Madrid County in 1900, there was a sawmill and a stave factory at Morehouse that only employed white workers. This was likely the Himmelberger-Harrison operation. An all-white workforce also prevailed at three lumber operations in Portage and La Font Township in New Madrid County. The census by no means documents the existence of all sawmills, particularly the mobile camps, but it illustrates the geographical trend of employers only hiring white workers in certain areas.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, "James, John, Anna, and Alfred Peppard," Ohio Township, Mississippi County, MO, p. 4; Ancestry.com, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, "Patrick Clune," Ohio Township, Mississippi County, MO, p. 8.

⁹⁹ Ancestry.com, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, Liberty, Stoddard, MO; Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO; Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, Ohio and Mississippi Townships, Mississippi County, MO; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, Ohio, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, St. John, Portage, West, and La Font Townships, New Madrid County, MO; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, Portage, Pemiscot, MO; Ancestry.com, *1910 U.S. Federal Census*, Ohio,

Hough Township, New Madrid County and the “Imported” Black Lumber Worker

After the turn of the century, some lumber companies, particularly the larger ones in predominately, or all-white areas, began hiring African Americans. An incident in 1905 marked the beginning of a series of violent events surrounding Black lumber and land clearing employment that endured for over a decade. Just after turn of the century, Clarence J. Delaney of Wisconsin, along with partners John and Phillip Owen, established the Owen-Delaney Stave & Lumber Company near Henderson Mound in Hough Township, New Madrid County. In 1905, Delaney hired six African Americans to fill jobs he said whites refused to do. These positions involved working in a part of the plant where the temperatures got as high as 120 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁰⁰ According to Delaney, he had checked with landowners and laborers before hiring African Americans for these jobs, but when he did, about fifty white employees went on strike, which closed the mill.¹⁰¹

On the night of Wednesday September 13, Delaney and his wife Margaret were attacked by a group of men who fired around seventy-five shots into their house because they objected to him “importing” Black workers to work in the mill. According to newspaper reports, “the assault on Delaney has formed a subject of general discussion throughout Southeast Missouri.” Local whites did not approve of the vigilante tactics, but they were also against Delaney

Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1910 U.S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO; Ancestry.com, *1910 U.S. Federal Census*, Virginia, Pemiscot, MO; Ancestry.com, *1920 U.S. Federal Census*, Braggadocio, Pemiscot, MO; Ancestry.com, *1920 U.S. Federal Census*, Clay, Dunklin, MO; Ancestry.com, *U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*.

¹⁰⁰ “Gov. McKinley Wires New Madrid Officers to Protest Life and Property,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905.

¹⁰¹ Ogilvie, “Development of the Southeast,” 241; “May Kill Me, But I Stay, Says Wife in Riot,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 16, 1905.

"importing negroes." The article noted that similar incidents had occurred before.¹⁰²

Delaney appealed for help from the county sheriff, T. E. Henry, but he refused to do anything without a warrant.¹⁰³ Delaney then wrote Missouri Governor J. W. Folk (although the letter went to Lieutenant Governor John C. McKinley, who was acting in Folk's stead at that time).¹⁰⁴ Delaney was determined "to keep negroes at work in spite of any resistance" and went to New Madrid and purchased all the rifles he could.¹⁰⁵ Presumably he did this to arm the workers, himself, and his wife, who declared "they may kill me if they wish, but I will not leave this place while my husband's life is in danger at the hands of those midnight assassins." The Black workers, however, decided the job was not worth risking their lives and they left. Acting Governor John C. McKinley put pressure on local authorities, and they arrested seven men: Lon and Wood Hughes, Jesse and Charles Wilson, G. D. Campbell, Will Dunn, and J. A. McHood.¹⁰⁶

Whether these men were ever found guilty is not clear, but it is doubtful given the sentiment of many whites in the county. Hough Township, in the northern part of the county, was all white at that time and remained so for decades thereafter. In 1940, there was only one African American living within the township boundaries. In this conflict at the lumber mill and camp, white employees did not want to work with African Americans, probably fearing that

¹⁰² "May Kill Me, But I Stay, Says Wife in Riot," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 16, 1905.

¹⁰³ "Race Battle Hotly Fought in Missouri," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905; "Gov. McKinley Wires New Madrid Officers to Protest Life and Property," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905.

¹⁰⁴ "Race War in New Madrid County," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 13, 1905.

¹⁰⁵ "Gov. McKinley Wires New Madrid Officers to Protest Life and Property," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905.

¹⁰⁶ "Race Battle Hotly Fought in Missouri," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905; "Gov. McKinley Wires New Madrid Officers to Protest Life and Property," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905; "Bought all Rifles in Town," *Spokane (WA) Daily Chronicle*, September 14, 1905; "May Kill Me, But I Stay, Says Wife in Riot," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 16, 1905.

Delaney would hire more Black workers willing to work at lower wages. These fears, however, were buttressed by the fact that local residents did not want African Americans living or working in that area at all.¹⁰⁷

This violence can be seen as a continuation of the violence and exclusion faced by Black railroad workers as late as 1902, but it differed in several substantial ways. The other incidents were handled locally, or not at all. In this situation, the employer appealed to the state government after local officials dragged their feet. Delaney appealed to the state government's desire to promote Missouri business when he wrote "Now the Owen-Delaney Stave and Lumber Co. have a great deal of money invested at this point and as secretary of the International Slack Coopers Stock Manufacturer's Association I pray for protection from you."¹⁰⁸

This situation also differed because the employer was a target of violence. Earlier violence had directly targeted Black workers, but in this case holding the owner responsible marked a new pattern that would continue into the next decade. This change in tactics reflected a recognition by white workers, nationwide, of the growing power of corporations and the willingness of white capitalists to use African Americans and immigrants to lower wages through competition and strike-breaking.¹⁰⁹

Finally, this situation marked a shift in how local authorities and the white elite dealt with violence. The perpetrators of this violence were arrested and went to trial. Local leaders were not concerned with the welfare of Black workers, but many prominent businessmen were interested in promoting the region, encouraging investment, and selling land. It was in the early

¹⁰⁷ Ancestry.com, *1910-1940 U.S. Federal Census*, Hough, New Madrid, MO.

¹⁰⁸ "Gov. McKinley Wires New Madrid Officers," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1905.

¹⁰⁹ Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 31.

twentieth century that white town leaders began establishing commercial clubs and land companies for such purposes, and advertising in newspapers across the country. Labor violence only hurt these goals.¹¹⁰

The rhetoric used to refer to the Black lumber workers who were threatened also highlights the way that space and scale were manipulated and racialized to determine who belonged and who should have access to employment opportunities. In this case, and in other similar situations, Black workers were frequently referred to as “imported.” This term was rarely used to refer to white workers. In this case, however, Delaney had hired the workers in the town of New Madrid, less than fifteen miles away.¹¹¹ Import means to “to bring from a foreign or external source.”¹¹² Thus, whites used the term to denote a boundary demarcating insider and outsider, native and foreign, who did and did not belong. While the term “foreign” was not reported to have been specifically used in the Delaney lumber camp incident, in the early twentieth century it was not uncommon for whites to refer to African Americans as foreigners within the United States, if they were perceived to be in places where they did not belong. The Black workers, even though they were recruited from the town of New Madrid where African Americans had lived since the colonial period, were “imported” because they did not live and work in all-white Hough Township. The geographic scale determining what was “imported” was racialized and geographically malleable.

“Imported” also refers to a commodity, and in this sense whites perceived the Black

¹¹⁰ C. F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., *The Modern Promised Land*, Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, 1910-ca. 1920, SEMO; “Development Number,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, March 2, 1917.

¹¹¹ Ogilvie, “The Development of the Southeast,” 41.

¹¹² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, s. v. “import,” accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/import>

workers not as individual human beings (reflected also by the fact that in newspaper reports they were not referred to by name), but as commodified labor. In this vein, “imported” denied the agency of those who traveled to work in the Owen-Delaney lumber mill. Certainly Delaney may have arranged for their transportation, but each worker made a choice to work at the camp, and indeed they chose to leave, perhaps deciding to try getting a job at the two lumber mills and stave and heading factory in the town of New Madrid.¹¹³ When they returned to New Madrid they undoubtedly shared their experience with other Black residents, establishing the Henderson Mound area as a place to avoid, or at least a place to approach armed and aware of the risks. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the terminology designating African Americans as “imported” continued to be used by whites in subsequent decades, not only to exclude them from job opportunities, but to deny resources like education and housing as well.

Black Southern Workers, Peonage, and the Rhetoric of Protection

The Black lumber workers hired by Clarence Delaney in 1905 chose to seek other employment rather than work under life-threatening conditions. One year later, over forty Black laborers from Memphis found this freedom taken away by employers in western New Madrid County, who hired them under false pretenses and then held them in peonage. Peonage, a state of involuntary servitude where a person is forced to work in order to pay off a debt, was common throughout the South from the late nineteenth century well into the mid-twentieth century. Blacks and whites suffered under this system, but by far the majority of victims were Black

¹¹³ Walter Williams, *The State of Missouri* (Columbia, MO: E. W. Stephens, 1904), 459.

sharecroppers or other types of rural workers.¹¹⁴

Many of the workers fought back, attempting to escape. John Reed, one of those who succeeded in getting away, reported the situation to a district attorney in Memphis.¹¹⁵ The case was fully prosecuted. Although the law against peonage was passed in 1867 during Reconstruction, the federal government did not prosecute anyone on these charges until 1899. According to historian Pete Daniel, the practice was most prevalent in the “cotton belt from the Carolinas to Texas and including the Mississippi Delta.” Other instances of peonage were prevalent in the turpentine forests of the Southeast.

The Bootheel was the northern edge of the Mississippi River delta region, but it had not yet begun to produce cotton in large quantities; thus, this peonage case was unusual at that time. It foreshadowed, however, the region’s turn towards typically southern labor practices, notably white attempts to recruit and control African American workers, which would take hold more firmly after the region turned to cotton production in the 1920s. Daniel states that peonage has historically emerged in areas where labor systems were transitioning.¹¹⁶ In the Bootheel, a southern labor system existed along the Mississippi River, where African Americans worked as tenant farmers and laborers, but it was in the early twentieth century that this system expanded westward towards the Little River Valley, which had previously been swampland. In an unusual twist, the peonage defendants claimed they were holding Black workers under armed guard in order to protect them from violence by whites who did not want any African Americans living or

¹¹⁴ Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1972), x.

¹¹⁵ John Reed testimony, “Direct and Cross Examination Records,” 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Cape Girardeau Research Center [hereafter cited as SHSMO-CG].

¹¹⁶ Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery*, x, 5-7, 21. The first federal case argued under the 1867 law was *United States v. Eberhart*, 127 F. 252 (C.C. Ga. 1899).

working west of the Little River, also called the “Big Ditch.” This defense exposed a rhetoric of protection that whites used in this Border South region in the twentieth century to both geographically exclude and immobilize African Americans.

The peonage case started out with white landowners’ desire for cheap labor to clear land, because they saw the potential for turning hundreds of thousands of acres of bottomland swamp into vast fields of corn, wheat, alfalfa, and other crops. Some began to recruit Black laborers from further South in order to make this happen, while others hired white laborers from surrounding states. Arrangements for clearing land varied depending on the employer, but some comprised forms of cash or share tenancy. For example, a tenant, in return for clearing a certain amount of acreage per year, would be able to farm the land and keep the harvest for the first year. Workers also cleared land on a cash wage system, getting \$1.50 a day, or \$10 an acre. Various combinations of such arrangements existed.¹¹⁷

In early 1906, the Smith Bros. Real Estate Company, headquartered in Sikeston, began recruiting Black laborers from Memphis, 140 miles away, for land clearing work as well as wheat harvesting. The Smith Bros. Company was comprised of several prominent businessmen, including Charles M. Smith, Sr., his brothers James and W. Rex, and Charles M. Smith Jr. They largely made their living marketing and selling newly cleared land to prospective buyers locally and throughout the Midwest, but they also owned two large farms not far from Sikeston, in western New Madrid County, near the border of Scott County. They leased these farms to William Wood and W. Lee Rodgers. Wood and Rodgers, in turn, requested that the Smiths find additional laborers to help clear the land. Some of the land had been planted in wheat, but much of the acreage was “new” land that was not drained or cleared of timber.

¹¹⁷ Ogilvie, “The Development of the Southeast,” 209-10.

The Smiths found it difficult to find and retain adequate local white labor to clear the land because of the working conditions and wages. There were few local African Americans to recruit, because of the region's general hostility to African Americans living in the areas.¹¹⁸ In 1900, there were only thirty-four African Americans living in the town of Sikeston, and most were domestic servants. The Smith land was located in West Township in New Madrid County, and in 1900 there were no African Americans living there.¹¹⁹

In order to obtain workers, the Smiths sought the help of a labor agent in Memphis. In early 1906, Charles Smith Jr. made several trips to the city in February, April, and May, where he met Black workers at Union Station and offered \$1.50 a day with board or \$2.00 without board, and payment every Saturday. These were good wages, especially for a rural area where farm work might yield fifty to eighty cents per day.¹²⁰ Henry Stokes, who had gone to Memphis from Little Rock looking for work, had a wife and family. He later testified: "That suited me. I had but a little money, and I left that with my family, and expected to send them money once a week, that they might have their support." Alfred Jackson was working for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad near Memphis, putting down concrete and trestles. He was making \$1.75 a day, but had to pay \$4.00 a week in board, so he thought Smith's offer was better. Other workers made similar decisions. They were making from \$1.50 to \$2.00 a day in Memphis, but

¹¹⁸ "Says Farmers Kept 42 Negroes as Prisoners," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 14, 1906; "Slavery Laid to Planters," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1906; David P. Dyer, *Autobiography and Reminiscences* (St. Louis, MO: William Harvey Miner Company, Inc., 1922), 233-34.

¹¹⁹ Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, Sikeston, Richland, Scott, MO; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, West, New Madrid, MO.

¹²⁰ "Direct and Cross Examination Records," 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG; "Says Farmers Kept 42 Negroes as Prisoners," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 14, 1906; Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 90. These were the wages paid in Georgia in 1916 for farm work. Undoubtedly there was regional wage variation, but typically farm labor paid less than rural industrial jobs.

the cost of room and board significantly cut into their earnings.¹²¹

Smith was able to recruit workers fairly easily because he lied about the wages they would receive, their working conditions, and the work they would be doing. He told John Reed and about fifteen other men that they would be working at a flour mill in Sikeston. He told Jim Hayes he would be working at a grain elevator. He told another man named John Reed that he would be working at a flouring mill in Poplar Bluff. He told others they would be harvesting wheat. This was partly true. However, much of the work they did was cutting and rolling logs, digging ditches, and a variety of other tasks involved in preparing “new land” to make it usable for agriculture.¹²² The fact that Smith lied in order to recruit workers reflects the fact that he knew it would be difficult to hire people away from urban jobs if he were honest about working conditions.

After agreeing to go with Smith, the men traveled by train to Sikeston, where they got into hacks that took them to the farms managed by either Wood or Rodgers. Once they arrived, they were locked into unkempt, overcrowded housing, or “stockades.” They were guarded while they worked during the day, and they received no wages. They were told they were being guarded to make sure they paid off their transportation costs from Memphis, but most workers knew the cost was only about \$4.34 and they had paid this off within a week. Others were told the less they asked the better off they would be.¹²³

Some of the workers were beaten, and others were shot at as they tried to escape. Some

¹²¹ Henry Stokes, Alfred Jackson, and George Wilson testimonies, “Direct and Cross Examination Records,” 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG.

¹²² John Reed, Jim Hayes, and John Reed testimony, “Direct and Cross Examination Records,” 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG.

¹²³ Jodie Holmes testimony, “Direct and Cross Examination Records,” 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG.

escape attempts were successful, but most of the men who got away did not report the situation to authorities. John Reed, however, returned to Memphis and told the District Attorney.¹²⁴ U.S. Marshals arrived at the farms June 13, 1906. They arrested William Wood, his son Floyd, W. Lee Rodgers, guard Benjamin Fields and Benjamin Stone, as well as several members of the Smith family. At the time that the marshals arrived, forty-four people were imprisoned, including a small number of women. The total number of people imprisoned over the first six months of the year, including many who escaped, was higher.¹²⁵

The men were charged with peonage in the U.S. District Court at Cape Girardeau. This was the first prosecuted case of peonage in this region. It is possible the practice existed before in agricultural areas along the Mississippi River, but no cases were documented. The men charged with peonage defended their actions on several grounds, but one unusual justification was that they were imprisoning the Black agricultural workers in order to protect them from violence. The Smiths' land was located in New Madrid County just west of the Little River. There was an informal edict, or tradition, among local whites that African Americans were not allowed to live or work west of this boundary.¹²⁶

It is not clear when this exclusionary line was established, but since Dunklin and Stoddard Counties, which comprised most of the territory west of the Little River, were nearly all-white, even after African Americans began migrating after the Civil War, it had probably been enforced to some degree for decades. Until recent drainage projects, much of the Little

¹²⁴ John Reed testimony, "Direct and Cross Examination Records," 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG.

¹²⁵ "Says Farmers Kept 42 Negroes as Prisoners," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 14, 1906; U.S. Farm Security Administration, *Southeast Missouri: A Laboratory for the Cotton South* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Farm Security Administration, 1940), 2.

¹²⁶ Ogilvie, "The Development of the Southeast," 240.

River had been the Little River Swamp. This natural boundary made east-west travel very difficult, but it became easier with the drainage of the swamp and the channeling of the Little River in to the “Big Ditch.” The Little River can be seen in Figure 5. It roughly bisects the Bootheel. The white parts of the map indicate that African Americans did not live in these areas in 1910. The map is broken up by census enumeration district. The shaded parts reflect the concentration of African Americans living in a particular district.

The functioning of the Little River as a racial boundary was formally recorded in court testimony during the peonage trial, *U.S. vs. Smith et. al.* The case is important, then, for confirming the exclusion of African Americans from economic opportunities in the western part of the region, belying any assumptions that the whiteness of these counties was “natural.” The testimony of the Black workers also clearly contradicted the defendants’ claims to be protecting them, and illustrated that the Smiths and others were most concerned with protecting their source of labor. While the Smiths’ argument that they were protecting workers was specious, the possibility of violence from whites was very real. The Smiths probably knew that the workers would leave if they found their lives endangered, just as several had done the previous year at the Owen-Delaney lumber camp. The violence at the lumber camp was widely known in the region and Clarence Delaney was a witness for the defense in this peonage case, testifying to the resistance of many whites to Black labor.¹²⁷

The testimony of local whites about the racial boundary illuminates the unpredictability African Americans faced when they tried to find work west of the counties along the Mississippi River. Sam Pikey, who lived about fifteen miles from the Smith land, had hired African Americans to work on his farm several years before, but a group of whites shot into the workers’

¹²⁷ Ogilvie, “Development of the Southeast,” 241.

house. Apparently for several years prior to this incident, Black farm laborers had worked in peace on his farm, but something triggered the violence and from that point forward he stopped hiring African Americans. Pikey reported that the only place African Americans could consistently work and live was along the Mississippi River and near the town of New Madrid.¹²⁸

M. J. Conran, a landowner and politician, lived in New Madrid but hired Black laborers to build some barns and houses northwest of the village of Conran, in La Font Township. A few years before, the workers came to his house in the middle of the night and told him they had been shot at by whites. He reported: "They have what is called an imaginary dead line in the country and any negroes are prohibited from working beyond that line. Labor is very scarce and we have to resort to negro labor, in order to get the work done. I had to put the negroes in a wagon outside of the imaginary dead line and drive them into the clearing and work them until evening and then drive them out. It cost 25 or 33 1/3 per cent more money than if I could take negro labor in there and keep them there." Conran noted that generally African Americans could live in New Madrid and Lesieur Townships, part of St. John, and a very small part of La Font. All of these townships, except La Font, bordered the Mississippi River.¹²⁹

Most of the workers Charles Smith Jr. recruited in Memphis would have had no idea this "dead line" existed. In fact, if that area had a reputation for danger, it may have been difficult to recruit Black workers in eastern New Madrid County along the river, especially after the Delaney Mill incident. It is also possible that prominent landowners in the eastern part of the county would have resented Smith luring away their farm workers. However, given the plans for

¹²⁸ Sam Pikey testimony, "Direct and Cross Examination Records," 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG.

¹²⁹ M. J. Conran testimony, "Direct and Cross Examination Records," 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG; Ogilvie, "Development of Southeast Missouri Lowlands," 240. The name "Lesieur" has also been spelled "Le Sieur" and "LeSieur."

peonage, most likely Smith went to Memphis to find workers because he wanted individuals who did not have family and friends nearby who could expose their practices.

The men who accepted Smith's offer were from all across the South. Their testimony in the court case sheds light on new labor recruitment and Black migration patterns in the Bootheel, as a result of African Americans' constant search for better wages and working conditions, and white ambitions for profiting from the landscape and finding the cheapest labor possible. The testimony of the imprisoned workers reveal that this was a highly mobile group of predominately men, who moved in search of the best economic opportunities within the Border and Deep South before the Great Migration. Most of these men sought industrial work, although many had experience with farm work and were willing to do it if the job paid enough. For the most part, these were not men seasonally supplementing a home farm, as was the case of many men who worked in sawmills in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, these men primarily made their living through industrial or transportation work.¹³⁰

Emory Nichols was twenty-one, originally from Helena, Arkansas and had just been released from the youth reformatory in Boonville, Missouri. He had been employed on Smith land a couple years before, but at that time the workers were free to come and go as they pleased. Nichols had killed someone and served an eighteen-month sentence. After his release, he looked for work on the railroad, and some white workers suggested he go to the Smith farms. John Reed was thirty-nine, from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He enlisted in the army and then worked for the Cuba Central Railroad (in Missouri). He went from Cuba, Missouri to Mobile, Alabama, to

¹³⁰ Jones, *Black Ulysses*, 15-20. Jones notes that for many African American men born just before the Civil War, property ownership was seen as the best route to autonomy. Families who were able to purchase land or sharecropped land in the hopes of purchasing property, used lumber work to supplement their earnings. In the early twentieth century, however, for many men, lumber work became a full-time alternative to agriculture.

Memphis, looking for work, before being recruited by Smith. Henry Stokes, forty-five, was originally from Virginia, had been in the Army until 1886, and then had worked as a Mississippi River roustabout between St. Louis and Cape Girardeau before spending years working on the railroad. Despite working predominately in transportation, he told the examiner “I had worked on a farm lots of times.” Albert Logan, from Mississippi, had worked at a sawmill, an oil mill, and on the Mississippi River levee at Memphis. Other men had worked in sawmills, coal mining, and grain elevators.¹³¹

In an outcome unusual for peonage cases, most of the men accused were convicted and served time in federal prison at Fort Leavenworth. They were only convicted of one of forty-four counts, however, and charges were dropped against two of the Smith brothers, James and Rex, who did not appear to have had an active role in the Black workers’ imprisonment. Charles Smith, Sr. and Charles Smith Sr. received the heaviest penalty, being fined \$5,000 each and sentenced to three and a half and two and a half years in federal prison, respectively. Smith Sr.’s sentence was close to the maximum sentence of \$5,000 and five years.¹³²

Marketing the Missouri Bootheel as a White Frontier

Ironically, elite white men like the Smiths, while recruiting Black labor to work as prisoners on their land, tried to sell land to white midwestern farmers by emphasizing how white the region was, and how purchasers from Illinois, Indiana, and other midwestern states would not

¹³¹ Emory Nichols testimony, John Reed, Henry Stokes, and Albert Logan testimonies, “Direct and Cross Examination Records,” 1906 Peonage Case, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG.

¹³² “Men Who Kept Negroes in Pen Sent to Prison,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 1, 1908; Dyer, *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, 233.

have to send their children to school with African Americans.¹³³ Their real estate company was part of a larger marketing campaign by the white civic leaders and railroad companies who saw the Missouri Bootheel as one of the last domestic frontiers in the United States, since so much land could be “reclaimed” from swamps and seasonal flooding.

This marketing campaign is critical not only for understanding the racial ideology of those who disseminated promotional materials, but for how this ideology materially affected African Americans. Thousands of whites, many from the Midwest, responded to these ads and brought with them expectations that they would be moving into a white yeoman farmer’s paradise, or if they were laborers, that they might be able to work their way into buying land. Many of the migrants from the Midwest moved from counties and towns that were increasingly going sundown as part of the “Great Retreat” described by sociologist James W. Loewen.¹³⁴ African Americans’ exclusion from much of the Bootheel west of land near the Mississippi had origins in the nineteenth century, but I contend it was buttressed by this midwestern migration.

The first wave of promotional coverage of the Bootheel began around the turn of the twentieth century and was correlated with the initiation of drainage projects, the rise of railroad transportation, and the lumber industry. The dominant goal in these efforts was to maximize profit. Railroads had obtained thousands of acres of swampy, overflow lands at a pittance from local county governments and some of the earliest literature was published by railroads encouraging settlement in the area. In 1902, the Cotton Belt Railroad (St. Louis Southwestern)

¹³³ “Requests to Pres. of U.S. for Pardons in Smith Case,” 1908, Oliver Legal Record Collection, SHSM-CG. The Smith Bros. had their main office in Sikeston, Missouri, but they hired agents to sell land in Illinois and Indiana cities. Charles M. Smith Sr. and Charles Smith Jr. submitted a Petition seeking a pardon. Among the signatures were businessmen from Bloomington, Morrisonville, Urbana, and Kewanee, Illinois and Columbus, Indiana; C. F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., *The Modern Promised Land*, Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, 1910-ca. 1920, SEMO.

¹³⁴ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 48-89.

published a news article on “The Awakening of Southeast Missouri,” which tempted readers with promises of unimproved land for three to seven dollars an acre. It specifically appealed to the landless or small midwestern farmer, perhaps the sons of farm families who were being crowded out of more established areas. “Here then is an opportunity for the man of small means to better his condition, to carve out a home of his own, to secure a farm at a few dollars cost that will compare favorably in point of fertility productiveness with the hundred dollars an acre land of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, or Tennessee.”¹³⁵

People saw this region as a domestic frontier at the same time that there was national anxiety among white Americans that the frontier was declared to be closed with the 1890 census. In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner lamented this loss and its implications for American democracy. As a result, the United States began to look outside its boundaries, using imperialism to seek new “frontiers” in other parts of the world. The Panama Canal was one example of an infrastructural imperialist project. This was a heady time for confidence in science and engineering, which ideologically and materially were imbricated with racial ideologies, leading to practices aimed at racial “fitness,” such as eugenics. It was also a time when such projects, in their conquest over nature, and their transformation of a swampy, sickly environment into a strong, healthy one, reflected the nation’s focus on the connection between physical health and manliness.¹³⁶

Not everyone was comfortable with imperialism, however, especially when ideals of

¹³⁵ “The Awakening of Southeast Missouri,” *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, December 1902.

¹³⁶ Frederick J. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920), 1-38, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm>; For examples of U.S. domestic and global infrastructural projects, see Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009) and Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

democracy and self-rule contradicted what the U.S. was actually carrying out, such as in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. A domestic project like the Missouri Bootheel, however, could be wholeheartedly embraced, for the process was similar to what the U.S. had been doing since its inception as a country. Private and government entities were embarking on engineering feats that provided the confidence and experience for projects abroad. In addition to the drainage of the Missouri Bootheel, the Everglades in Florida were partially drained, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed the Mississippi River levee system.¹³⁷

The notion of a frontier was, of course predicated on the erasure of Native Americans living in “unsettled areas.” It was also predicated on diminishing the role African Americans played as laborers, citizens, and shapers of the physical and cultural landscape.¹³⁸ In the Bootheel, the marketing of the region as a “promised land” and “frontier” and “white man’s country” is illustrated in the promotional literature published by land companies, newspapers, and railroads after the turn of the century. C. F. Bruton’s promotional booklet, called “The Modern Promised Land,” included a section titled “No Negroes” in which he assures prospective buyers, “This is a white man’s country, strictly. No negro farmers where we sell land.”¹³⁹

This phrase “white man’s country” illustrated how, for whites, possession and occupation of the land was tied to their racial and national identity. As historian David A. Chang has

¹³⁷ Greene, *Canal Builders*, 5; Michael Grunwald, *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007); Charles A. Camillo and Matthew T. Percy, *Upon their Shoulders: A History of the Mississippi River Commission from its Inception through the Advent of the Modern Mississippi River and Tributaries Project* (Vicksburg, MS: Mississippi River Commission, 2004).

¹³⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton Press, 1987); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 17-23. Taylor does not include Missouri in his treatment of the West, but his intervention in addressing the erasure or minimization of the role of African Americans in western development is relevant to Missouri, which was part of the Trans-Mississippi West.

¹³⁹ C. F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., *The Modern Promised Land*, Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, 1910-ca. 1920, SEMO.

argued, “Both the land itself and stories about the land and what one could do with it – built a foundation for white American racial nationalism and colonialism.” The Jeffersonian ideal of a landowning republic pervaded the promotional literature of the Bootheel, but it was a racialized vision for the region and country. Moreover, if white laborers or sharecroppers did not own land, they could aspire to this pinnacle of American citizenship, and the Bootheel appeared to offer this opportunity. Chang explains that “both racism and class consciousness were part of white agrarianism.” Members of the white business class, such as C. F. Bruton, through their advertisements, emphasized the importance of race over class and this “resonated with the racism that was part of white agrarianism.”¹⁴⁰

In 1917 the *Sikeston Standard*, a Bootheel newspaper, published an eight-page “Special Development Number” in addition to its regular weekly edition. The banner at the top of the page proclaimed it to be “A Romance of Reclamation,” promising the reader a tantalizing departure from traditional newspaper content. Each page was filled with photographs of notable buildings and homes (complete with the cost of construction), crops and livestock from Scott County town and rural areas. Each image and its accompanying text told the story of how “gigantic forests...in a shallow, muddy sheet wrapped in the immense silence of a primeval waste” had been transformed into “a marvelous farming section of prosperous thrifty people” through drainage projects.¹⁴¹

The portrayal of the region as a place where white men could assert and forge their manly identity through capitalist ventures or farming was evident in the language used. A local

¹⁴⁰ Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 75, 174-77.

¹⁴¹ “Two Million Rich Swamp Acres Brought into Production through the Agency of Enormous Drainage Ditches,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, March 23, 1917.

newspaper lauded the work of Bruton, who was the head of a “noted and virile development organization.” He was celebrated as a “bold, aggressive pioneer,” and praised for his vision and public-spiritedness. Smith Bros. Co., of which two owner-employees had ten years before served time in Fort Leavenworth for imprisoning Black workers, was credited with first introducing drainage into the area and was praised for its dependability, expertise, and “record for square service.”¹⁴²

The real estate companies hoped to sell land to midwesterners with capital, but some of the promotional literature targeted individuals with less means, such as farm and day laborers. Around 1905 the Frisco Railroad, which had a line running from Memphis north to St. Louis and Kansas City, published a piece titled “An Indiana Man in South=East Missouri - Pemiscot County, Mo., and its Opportunities for the Investor and Homeseeker.” This piece was a reprinted letter originally sent by Mr. G. W. Infield to the Lafayette (Indiana) *Reader*, describing his visit to Southeast Missouri. During his stay he learned about Mr. Gaither, a local alfalfa farmer who arrived there from Indiana ten years before with only twelve dollars to his name. But this was no obstacle, because Gaither had “capital” in the form of his “ambition to own a farm” and his “vision of what he desired it to be.” His current wealth, including a piano and healthy bank account, was well-deserved because “he wanted it, worked for it, and he is in possession of it.” After effusively describing the money that could be made by growing alfalfa, potatoes, cotton, and corn, Infield’s letter ends with the following statement: “one thing that pleased me much was the desire of leading men that the country be owned and occupied by the small farmer. The fact is, the hope of our country is there. Its destiny is fastened to the fate of

¹⁴² “Development Number,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, March 2, 1917.

that class.”¹⁴³ This marketing strategy, touting the Bootheel as a land of opportunity for small farmers, would have had particular appeal during this early period where corporate farming was taking hold, where land was not available for purchase, or where they could not make a profit.¹⁴⁴

African American Migration to the Bootheel

White laborers and farmers from the Lower Midwest and Upper South were not the only seekers of a frontier “Promised Land.” As the testimony of the Black workers involved in the peonage case reveals, African Americans moved frequently in search of economic opportunity. World War I traditionally marks the beginning of the Great Migration, but African Americans were moving throughout the South and into the Midwest prior to that time. In the Bootheel, the migration of African Americans into the area in 1923, in search of farming opportunities in cotton agriculture, is most prominent in literature about the area. Earlier, smaller migrations, however, preceded and facilitated this larger movement.¹⁴⁵

A border area, the Missouri Bootheel had both midwestern and southern characteristics. Agriculture was predominately midwestern and transformations in the landscape offered remunerative wage work in industry, but the economy was shifting towards cotton. The Bootheel was for many wage workers a stop on the way further north, or a temporary sojourn before returning south. For farmers who held onto the dream of landownership, however, it was a

¹⁴³ Promotional Material, “An Indiana Man in South=East Missouri,” box 14, f. 23, Pemiscot Land and Cooperage Company Records, HPC.

¹⁴⁴ Thad Snow, *From Missouri* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 78-82, 87-95; Louis Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 40-54.

¹⁴⁵ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 56-62.

final destination.

A large number of Black wage workers who moved into the area for lumber and other jobs during this period were directly recruited in places like Memphis. However, while promotional literature about the region targeted the Midwest, it also circulated in southern states, and would have been seen by African Americans, many of whom migrated to the area on their own. Certainly the southern railroads like the Cotton Belts and Frisco touted the benefits of the region and would have circulated appeals widely in the South.

World War I draft registration cards from 1917 and 1918, as well as the enumeration of lumber towns in the 1920 census, provide some insight into where the migrants were from, the work they did, and who their employers were. These records reveal some intra-regional differences. In Dunklin County, nearly all African Americans worked in lumber or land clearing and were from outside Missouri. Because very few African Americans lived in the county, due to sundown restrictions, employers did not have a pool of local labor to draw from. Pemiscot County was more mixed, with African Americans working in agriculture as well as extractive industry. Those working in lumber or doing levee work were also from outside Missouri. People employed in farming tended to be from local places with longstanding communities, such as Cottonwood Point along the river, but some were also from further south. In Mississippi, New Madrid, and Scott Counties, Black male workers were predominately local, although a few large landowners had started recruiting from the South.¹⁴⁶

Figures 6 through 8 illustrate these intra-regional differences. The birthplace of workers in Pemiscot and Dunklin Counties were very similar, and there was a visible concentration from delta areas along the Mississippi River. In Mississippi and Scott Counties, registrants were born

¹⁴⁶ Ancestry.com, *U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*.

fairly close to where they worked in 1917 and 1918. New Madrid County shows a mix of local and non-local workers.

White employers' recruitment of Black workers from the Deep South was a relatively new phenomenon. The workers who came from Memphis to work on the Smith Bros. land, and were forced into peonage, were some of the earliest examples of white employers' adoption of this practice, but between 1910 and 1920 this recruitment became more prevalent. There was little similar recruitment for farm labor from the Deep South at this time, although cotton pickers did travel from adjacent states on a seasonal basis.¹⁴⁷ The active labor recruitment for lumber and other infrastructural operations established the groundwork for a massive agricultural recruiting effort around 1922-1923, when the region adopted cotton as its primary cash crop.

Few of the workers who came up to work during this time period stayed in the region. Some, like the laborers recruited by Charles M. Smith Jr. in Memphis, primarily sought wage work and moved frequently in search of better opportunities, some coming to Chicago or St. Louis, or returning south. Others, as historian William P. Jones has described in his book about Black lumber workers, were looking for seasonal work. Out of a sample of 132 World War I registration cards of Black lumber or land clearing workers in Dunklin and Pemiscot Counties, forty-nine recorded marital and dependent status. Out of these forty-nine, sixteen, or about one-third, were married and two-thirds were single. Out of the thirty-three single workers, however, about one-third, or ten workers, had a non-spousal, immediate family member economically dependent on them. Moreover, the draft registration cards only recorded single or married, not divorced or widowed, so some of the single workers likely had been previously married, and several listed children as their dependents. This meant that twenty-six workers, just over 50

¹⁴⁷ Wyllie, "Race and Class Conflict," 187-96.

percent, had someone dependent on their income, and often those family members were living further south. As Jones has argued, this wage work was critical for family support.¹⁴⁸

The age of the workers varied widely, from 18 to 45. The average age was 30 years old, and the median was 32 years old, reflecting the fact that this was a relatively mature workforce. This data in part reflects the age limits for World War I draft registration, but most lumber workers fell into this range. The average and median were likely a bit higher, given that the 1920 census enumeration of a lumber community in Rives, Dunklin County, Missouri included a small number of workers over age 45. The World War I data also is limited because it is comprised only of men, whereas about 2 percent of lumber workers were women. In Rives, Hattie L. Robertson and Nannie Williams also worked as laborers in the stave mill.¹⁴⁹

The companies that employed these men and women in 1917 and 1918 in Dunklin County were predominately the Wisconsin Lumber Company, the Converse Cooperage Company, the Deering Southwestern Railway, and J. H. Findlay, a contractor from Memphis involved in ditching and clearing land. Workers lived in Rives, a village founded when the Deering Southwestern Railway was built in 1894. In Pemiscot County, African Americans employed in lumber or associated manufacturing, railroading, and land clearing, worked for the Wisconsin Lumber Company and Deering and Southwestern Railway at Deering as well as the Atlas Hoop Company and Dillman Egg Case Company at Caruthersville. In New Madrid County, they found government levee jobs along the river as well as jobs at the Way Cooperage Company in the town of New Madrid, also along the river.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Ancestry.com, U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918; Jones, *Black Ulysses*, 15.

¹⁴⁹ Ancestry.com, *U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*; Ancestry.com, *1920 U.S. Federal Census*, "Hattie L. Robertson" and "Nannie Williams," Clay, Dunklin, MO, p. 3B.

¹⁵⁰ Ancestry.com, *U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*.

Notably absent are African Americans working for the Himmelberger-Harrison Lumber Company, “one of the largest lumbering operations in the Midwest,” and the Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company, also a major enterprise. Himmelberger-Harrison was located in Stoddard County and at Morehouse in New Madrid County. Gideon Anderson had operations in Pemiscot, Dunklin, and New Madrid Counties, but the towns of Gideon, in New Madrid County, and Clarkton, in Dunklin, were central to their business.¹⁵¹

Night Riding along the Borders of Development

Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company began to hire Black workers around 1915, but the company became a target of one of the largest coordinated series of night riding attacks in the region’s history. The systematic organization, longevity of activity, and identification and prosecution of many of the 1915 night riders, sheds light on the profile of white workers who saw violence as their main option for change. Tracing the migration history of the accused also suggests that many night riders came from the Midwest, from Illinois and Indiana, states with their own history of night riding, even though some may have been inspired by the night riding incidents which took place in the Kentucky and Tennessee Black Patch (tobacco regions) around 1908.

Most of the night riding attacks took place in 1915 in three counties: New Madrid, Dunklin, and Scott. Like the Delaney incident in 1905, these night riders tried to scare off Black

¹⁵¹ Descriptive overview, Himmelberger-Harrison Lumber Company Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University, http://library.semo.edu/archives/collections/Finding%20Aids/Himmelberger-Harrison_Papers/CSS/H_and_H_Descriptive_Overview.htm; Information sheet, Gideon-Anderson Lumber & Mercantile Company Papers, 1901-1938, R290, State Historical Society of Missouri, <http://shs.umsystem.edu/manuscripts/rolla/r0290.pdf>; “Gideon, 1900-1986,” <http://gideon.k12.mo.us/town/box.htm>

workers, but the primary targets were landowners and lumber company employers. There were two separately coordinated night riding events in 1915. The first case diverged from the rest, in that white tenant farmers targeted Black farming communities in Lesieur Township along the Mississippi River in New Madrid County. The other incidents targeted white employers, the Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company, and the Scott County Milling Company.¹⁵²

In February 1915, African American farmers who lived in the vicinity of Linda, Point Pleasant, and Riddle's Point in Lesieur Township, along the Mississippi River, were targeted by white night riders who thought they could negotiate lower rents from landowners if African Americans were forced out the area. This case differed, however, from the Delaney incident and subsequent night rider activity in several important respects. First, this was not a predominately white or all-white area in which Black workers were being "imported" by employers. This area had for generations been the home of Black farmers; in fact, in this area Black tenants outnumbered whites. The landowners, moreover, were not companies or capitalists who had recently moved from the Midwest, but rather prominent local families who had originally been slaveowners and had acquired land in the nineteenth century. These landowners had, however, expanded and consolidated their holdings, in many cases forming land corporations. Thus, they were part of the larger trend of corporate consolidation that created difficult conditions for workers, Black and white. Still, the landowners in New Madrid were not directly threatened.¹⁵³

The main method of intimidation the night riders used was to post notices at African Americans' homes that warned them to leave. One note, written by the "Night Riders of New

¹⁵² Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 48-51; Roll, "Gideon's Band: From Socialism to Vigilantism in Southeast Missouri, 1907-1916," *Labor History* 43, no. 4 (2002): 483-503.

¹⁵³ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 48; "300 Negroes Flee after Night Raid; Militia Asked For," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 20, 1915; Landowners involved in included M. J. Conran, D. R. Hunter.

Madrid County,” threatened “All you negroes better get away from here. There has been anuff of notice put up, and get out. We won’t give you this notice again. If you are not gone at 10 days we will dynamite you home.” At least two men, Lonnie Davidson and Burt Miller, were arrested for shooting at a Black farmer while he was working in the field.¹⁵⁴

According to newspapers accounts, as a result of this intimidation, around 300 African Americans decided to leave the area and go to Cairo, Illinois, Paducah, Kentucky, and other surrounding areas. While this description of mass exodus may have been exaggerated to some degree, undoubtedly many did leave, deciding they could find tenancy arrangements somewhere else. Many families had been in the area for generations, however, and decided to stay. George Allen, for example, had lived in Lesieur Township since 1870 or before, and in 1910 was still living there with his wife Mary and their children. He died in 1926 and Mary moved in with her daughter-in-law. The Treadwells were a large, extended family that had migrated from North Carolina, Alabama, and then Tennessee, to Missouri. Some members of this family stayed, and others moved to surrounding areas. Edward Treadwell, one of the few Black landowners in the county, decided to go elsewhere according to a newspaper report. Martha Treadwell, one of the landowning matriarchs of the family, relocated across the river to Mounds, Pulaski County, Illinois, where she operated a boarding house. It is impossible to know if these moves were in direct response to the 1915 violence, but they illustrate how such violence forced upon African Americans the emotional and material costs of separating from family, uprooting and potentially losing or selling land. Violence, difficult economic conditions, or both were responsible for a decrease in Black landownership between 1910 and 1920 in the county. In 1910 there were

¹⁵⁴ “Militia Official is at New Madrid, Negroes Fleeing,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 21, 1915.

eighteen Black landowners in New Madrid County, and by 1920 there were only two.¹⁵⁵

The underlying source of this violence was the fact that at the beginning of the year, when tenants negotiated annual contracts with landowners, white tenant farmers wanted rent reduced to \$3 an acre because they had faced financial adversity during the past few years. There were two devastating floods, one in 1912 and one in 1913. This was followed by a drought in 1914. African Americans were willing to pay the rent landlords were asking, which was \$6 an acre annually. Thus, landowners gave preference to Black tenants. White tenant farmers thought getting them to leave would provide them leverage for getting rents reduced. Landowners claimed African Americans were in a better financial position because they were better farmers and were willing to work longer hours.

In truth, both groups probably experienced hardship. Many Black farm families had mortgages on their equipment and animals and were also in a precarious position. Yet the fact that many of the Black farmers were renters, not sharecroppers, and they could obtain mortgages, meant they were a step above most Black farmers in the South. In 1900 in New Madrid County, there were 132 African Americans cash tenants and twenty-seven share tenants. In fact, sharecropping was not the dominant form of tenancy for white or Black farmers in the Bootheel at this time, unlike further South, because cotton was not yet the dominant crop. It was grown more extensively in southern New Madrid than in most other parts of the Bootheel, but

¹⁵⁵ "Militia Official is at New Madrid, Negroes Fleeing," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 21, 1915; Ancestry.com, 1870 U.S. Federal Census, "George Allen, Lesieur, New Madrid, Mo, p. 274A; Ancestry.com, 1910 U.S. Federal Census, "George and Mary Allen," Lesieur, New Madrid, MO, p. 4B; Geo. Allen, death certificate 23098-c, Missouri Death Certificates, 1910-1964, Missouri Digital Heritage, <http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/deathcertificates/Default.aspx#searchDB>; Ancestry.com, 1930 U.S. Federal Census, "Mary Allen," Lesieur, New Madrid, MO, p. 5A; Ancestry.com, 1910 U.S. Federal Census, "Martha Treadwell," Lesieur, New Madrid, MO, p. 10B; Ancestry.com, 1920 U.S. Federal Census, "Martha Treadwell," Mound, Pulaski, Illinois, p. 14A; 1910 and 1920 U.S. Federal Census, Agriculture, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>;

agriculture was diversified and included crops typically associated with both the Midwest and South. The most common agricultural position was farm laborer.¹⁵⁶

Some of the Black tenants who had been in the area for generations may have also have had paternalistic relationships, dating back to the period of slavery, with landlords or bank owners, which facilitated getting mortgages and rental agreements. Many African Americans, such as the Dunklins, Lafonts, Lesieurs, Maulsbys, and O'Bannons shared last names with elite white families.¹⁵⁷ Ultimately, although many Black families left the area in response to the shooting, the township did not experience a dramatic reduction in population, either because people returned after the immediate danger was over or other farmers moved in to take their place. In 1910 there were 579 African Americans in the township, and in 1920 there were 668.¹⁵⁸

Despite paternalistic relationships with their tenants, white landowners' primary concern was getting their crops harvested, not the safety of Black farmers. Newspaper reports about the reaction of landowners conflicted. At first, spokespersons like M. J. Conran were quoted as saying they could take care of the situation themselves if no one interfered. A couple days later, reports of a meeting of landowners relayed that landowners were reluctant to pursue the night riders, because they did not want to put themselves in danger, and because they would have been criticized by most whites for favoring Black workers. The landowners most affected refused to be deputized to pursue the offenders, claiming they did not have the time. Instead, they

¹⁵⁶ "300 Negroes Flee after Night Raid; Militia Asked For," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 20, 1915; 1910 and 1920 U.S. Federal Census, Agriculture, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>

¹⁵⁷ Ancestry.com, 1910 U.S. Federal Census, Lesieur, New Madrid, MO; Ancestry.com, 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Slave Schedules.

¹⁵⁸ Ancestry.com, 1910-1920 U.S. Federal Census, Lesieur, New Madrid, MO.

unsuccessfully tried to get the state militia to intervene. John B. O'Meara, the Adjutant-General of the militia, insisted local authorities try to handle the situation first. At least two men ultimately were arrested for this violence.¹⁵⁹

Violent incidents continued sporadically throughout the year. A month after the intimidation along the Mississippi River in New Madrid County, several men were arrested for threatening to attack the owner of the Scott County Milling Company and Baker-Matthews Manufacturing Co., because they were angry about economic conditions and because these companies had hired several African Americans.¹⁶⁰ The men involved in this incident were arrested, tried, and sent to Fort Leavenworth. Black workers in Pemiscot County were threatened by a vigilante group in March.¹⁶¹ In October and November, bands of vigilantes threatened white land and business owners across three counties, and threatened to burn down company towns. Some of the night riders targeted the Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company, demanding higher wages and the hiring of white workers only. The scale of this terror could not be ignored by the white elite, and the drama ended with the trial of sixty-seven men in a New Madrid courtroom. A small number received prison sentences.¹⁶²

Who were the night riders? Some were members of, or were influenced by the growth of the Socialist Party in the region. The Socialist Party first took root in the Bootheel in 1905, and gained popularity until its peak around 1912. Although the party did not advocate violence, the anti-Black rhetoric espoused in local socialist newspapers, at community picnics and other

¹⁵⁹ "New Madrid Men Refuse to Help Protect Negroes," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 22, 1915.

¹⁶⁰ "Eight Men Taken as Night Riders at Sikeston, MO," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 21, 1915; Charles L. Blanton, "The Regulators Regulated," *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, March 26, 1915.

¹⁶¹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 48.

¹⁶² "Night Rider Outrage," *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, November 12, 1915; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 48-9.

gatherings, fueled vigilante violence. As Jarod Roll argues, “the Bootheel Socialist Party was very much a creature of its environs.” African American laborers were seen as direct threats to the intertwined values of white supremacy, independent labor, Protestant evangelicalism, white manhood, and white womanhood. Historian Sally Miller, in her research on African Americans and the Socialist Party, points out that the Party encompassed a range of attitudes on race, but “The Socialist, concerned as he might be with the downtrodden, the impoverished, the under-represented, nevertheless did not see the Negro.” On the other hand, the Party did, in some parts of the South, recruit African Americans. Local branches tended to be integrated in the Upper South, but segregated in the Lower South.¹⁶³ In the Bootheel, however, Socialists, or laborers influenced by Party rhetoric, saw African Americans as an impediment to their success, not as a potential ally. It not clear how many night riders were actually members of the Socialist Party. At least two men, Riley and Tude Miskell, had been members of the Scott County local. Regardless, because the rhetoric of both groups was similar, they were conflated in the mind of the public, which hastened the demise of the Party after the night riders were indicted. In court, many of the men claimed they were persuaded to join because the groups were working-men’s movements, or labor unions, and they did not realize what they were getting into.¹⁶⁴

The absence of combined class struggle between whites and blacks against the white elite was not pre-ordained, because such alliances occurred in other areas of the South and later in the Bootheel. In the Bootheel, however, large areas, including Dunklin, Stoddard, Scott, and the western part of New Madrid counties were nearly all-white, and established traditions of

¹⁶³ Sally Miller, ed. *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 33-8.

¹⁶⁴ Roll, “Gideon’s Band,” 483-503; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 49.

excluding Black labor made such alliances less likely. Census research also indicates that many of the night riders were originally from Illinois or Indiana, as indicated in Figure 9. These states were the targets of intense marketing efforts by businessmen in the Bootheel, who were trying to encourage the migration of white midwesterners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Promises of land, economic mobility, and success in “white man’s country,” drew thousands. Many who moved to the region were farmers and bought land, but a significant number were also laborers or tenants who hoped to improve their circumstances in Missouri.

When this did not happen, they grew frustrated with the stranglehold of capital on wages, rent, and land. Many of these laborers were from parts of Indiana and Illinois that had their own traditions of whitecapping and excluding African Americans. As Loewen has documented, the majority of towns in Illinois during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century became sundown towns. When these families moved to Missouri, they favored the existing sundown policies in certain parts of the Bootheel.¹⁶⁵ Some of the night riders may have also had connections to vigilante violence that took place in the Black Patch tobacco war of Kentucky and Tennessee from about 1906 to 1910. In that situation, planters formed a protective marketing association to fight the monopolistic hold of the American Tobacco Company. Night riders targeted farmers who would not join their collective endeavor, and white farmers and laborers also took out their economic grievances on African Americans. At least two men in the Bootheel claimed that connection, and one group of night riders called themselves the Possum Hunters, a terms used in the Black Patch conflicts.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 4.

¹⁶⁶ Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890-1915* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 56-182; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 49.

Hardy Lee: Negotiating a Geography of Violence

If there was one quality that characterized the Bootheel in terms of race relations, it was unpredictability. In order to survive and take advantage of farming and rural industrial opportunities, African Americans living in the region gathered and shared information about which individual and companies would hire them, what geographical areas were hostile or dangerous for them to live in, work, or travel through, and how to manipulate situations to their advantage. This practice of creating networks of information about places in order to avoid danger and find comfort has a long history. Examples include slave landscapes, and auto travel landscapes shaped by the Negro Motorist Green Books.¹⁶⁷

The experiences of Hardy Lee, an African American living in Lesieur Township, near Point Pleasant, in New Madrid County, Missouri, demonstrates this accumulation of knowledge and how it affected travel and other decisions. Lee was born in Tennessee in 1884, moved to Hickman, Mississippi County, Arkansas by 1910, and then to Lesieur Township in New Madrid County, Missouri in the 1910s.¹⁶⁸ The potentially life or death knowledge of where groups of hostile whites lived and the spaces in which African Americans were not welcome is illuminated

¹⁶⁷ Rebecca Ginsburg, "Freedom and the Slave Landscape," *Landscape Journal*, 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 36-44; Oh Say Can You See?: The National Museum of American History Blog; "An Atlas of Self-reliance: The Negro Motorist's Green Book (1937-1964)," by Jay Driskell, July 30, 2015. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/negro-motorists-green-book>.

¹⁶⁸ Ancestry.com, 1910 *U. S. Federal Census*, "Hardy Lee," Hickman, Mississippi, AR, p. 20A; Ancestry.com, 1920 *U. S. Federal Census*, "Hardy Lee," Point Pleasant, Lesieur, New Madrid, MO, p. 1A. It is difficult to find first person perspectives of African Americans living in the Missouri Bootheel in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but in the 1960s, Hardy Lee included some reminiscences in his correspondence with Charles M. Barnes, a prominent white Republican businessman from the Marston area, whom he had worked for as a younger man. At some point, Lee moved to California, but he kept in touch with many people from home and his sister remained in New Madrid County. Certainly these memories were shaped by the passing of years and the power differential between himself and Barnes, but Lee's letters provide a window into the political and geographical knowledge African Americans cultivated in their daily lives

in Lee's experience traveling home one winter. He and a friend, Will Haynes, had taken the train somewhere and returned to the station at Portageville in New Madrid County. It was snowing and they still had to make their way on foot, eight or nine miles east to Point Pleasant, located on the Mississippi River. George De Lisle, a white landowner who also held a city position, tried to get them to stay in the City Hall overnight, but "we being afraid of Portageville late Hours, we headed for Home..."¹⁶⁹

Portageville was not strictly a sundown town, but it was very close to being one. There were only eighteen African Americans living in a town of over 1,200 whites. There was no Black part of town and the individuals and married couples living there were mostly servants. The entire township of Portage, in fact, was hostile towards African Americans and here was a long history of rural exclusion in this township. In 1880, Portage Township and the western part of Lesieur Township were enumerated together and there were only two Black servants in the entire jurisdiction. In the eastern part of Lesieur, however, there were 380 African Americans. In 1900 there were no Blacks in the entire Portage Township and in 1910 there were none in the rural part.¹⁷⁰

Hardy Lee and Will Haynes had to cross through this all-white rural township, and then into Lesieur Township, which still had all-white areas unfriendly to Black travelers. As Lee recalled, they made it to Mr. Clarence Bodine's father's house, and as "they did not allow Negroes in that little settlement, Old Will Haynes told me we had just as well to die in the cold as to be beaten by Mr. Bodine and his friends by knocking on the door after midnight." Lee and Haynes were desperate, given the weather, so they knocked on Bodine's door. When it opened,

¹⁶⁹ Hardie Lee to Charles M. Barnes, April 21, 1962, correspondence series, f. 88, Charles Merlin Barnes Papers, SHSMO-CO.

¹⁷⁰ Ancestry.com 1900-1920 U.S. Federal Census, Portage, New Madrid, MO.

Bodine noticed Lee was carrying a sack and asked what was in it. Lee told him “a few pints of old Boon whisky.” Bodine then let Lee in and drank a pint. He let them stay and they made it home safe the next day.¹⁷¹

This situation could have ended much differently if Lee and Haynes had not had something Bodine wanted. Clarence Bodine and his father Seth were not particularly prominent men, but their reputation and that of their neighbors as being unfriendly to African Americans was apparently well known. Since Bodine was living in a different township in 1920, Lee and Haynes made this journey between 1910 and 1920, the same decade that white tenant farmers tried to run Black farmers out of the area. In fact, Clarence Bodine lived very close to Black farmer Edward Treadwell, who was mentioned in a local news article about the conflict. The Bodines moved to New Madrid County from Webber, Jefferson County Illinois, just east of Mt. Vernon, between 1900 and 1910. The elder Bodine, Seth, had owned a farm there, but it was mortgaged. Something happened to reduce his circumstances, because in 1910 in Missouri he was still a farmer, but was renting his home.¹⁷²

The choice that Hardy Lee and Will Haynes had to make that cold, snowy night, was a difficult one. They could have risked their lives and continued walking. In the Bootheel, African Americans frequently had to make similar choices, not just in everyday travel, but in determining whether to seek employment or farming opportunities in areas that had reputations for being unsafe.

¹⁷¹ Hardie Lee to Charles M. Barnes, April 21, 1962, correspondence series, f. 88, Charles M. Barnes Papers, SHSMO-CO.

¹⁷² Ancestry.com, *1920 U. S. Federal Census*, “Clarence Bodine,” La Font, New Madrid, MO, p. 3A; Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, “Clarence Bodine” and “Seth Bodine,” Lesieur, New Madrid, MO, p. 11B; Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, “Seth Bodine” and “Clarence Bodine,” Webber, Jefferson, IL.

During the economic and social transformations taking place in the rural Bootheel, between 1890 and 1922, African Americans encountered opportunity and violence. Lumber companies that moved from the Midwest to harvest lowland hardwoods, and landowners seeking to clear their cutover land, began to recruit African Americans from further South, hoping to pay cheaper wages and prevent working-class solidarity by capitalizing on, and encouraging, racial animosity. African Americans from Mississippi, Alabama, and other southern states sought higher paying alternatives to the debt cycle of sharecropping and the low wages of farm labor, and were drawn to lumber and infrastructural jobs in the Bootheel. Their encounters with white working-class vigilantism, and peonage by white landowners, led many Black workers to leave the area for other opportunities.

There was a geography to this violence, which took place in counties and townships that were not adjacent to the Mississippi River. These were rural spaces that were nearly all white, populated by small farmers and laborers who had migrated from the Upland South, particularly Tennessee, in the nineteenth century, and then by small farmers and laborers from the Midwest, between 1880 and 1910. The violence and exclusionary practices of whites during this formative period largely maintained this system of rural racial apartheid until the 1920s. African Americans also encountered violence in the counties and major towns along the Mississippi River. As the next chapter will show, lynching was more common than racial expulsion as a tool of white supremacy. It was in this area that slavery had existed for generations, and the white elite sought to maintain racial control in the midst of Black institutional and population growth, changing residential patterns, and Black resistance to Jim Crow laws and other forms of oppression.

Chapter 1 Figures

Figure 3. This map shows the geography of violence against African Americans in the Missouri Bootheel and Northeast Arkansas, between 1890 and 1922. The teardrop symbols indicate violent incidents in Arkansas, and the circles indicate the locations of violence in Missouri. Data were taken from newspapers and secondary sources.

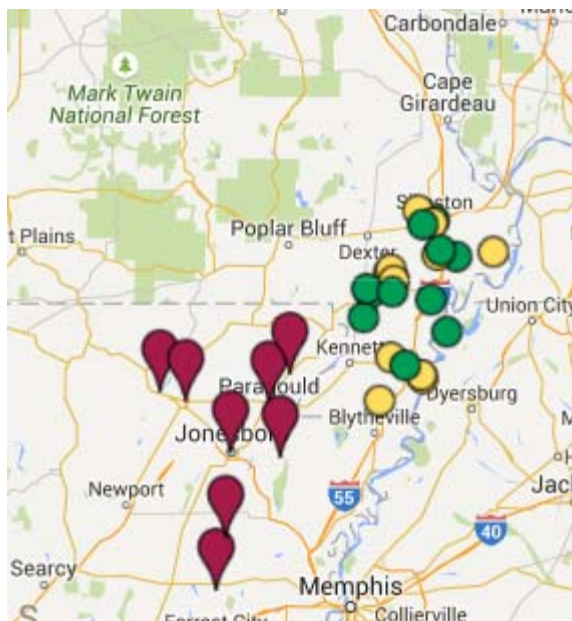


Figure 4. This map shows where laborers in the lumber industry were working between 1880 and 1920, using data from the census and World War I draft registration cards. The “x” indicates African Americans were working in that location. The “o” indicates camps or mills that were all-white.

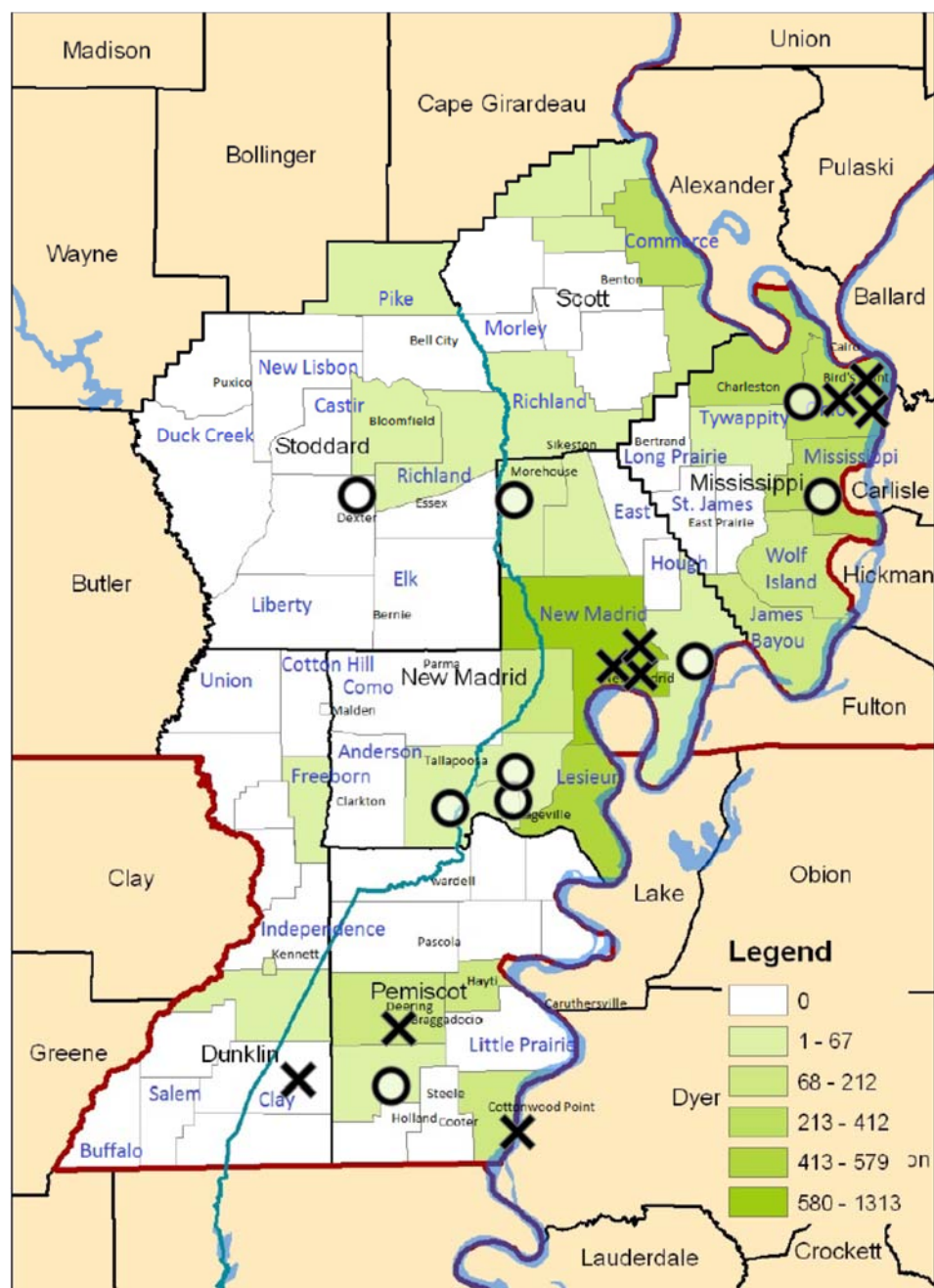


Figure 5. This map shows the census enumeration districts in the Missouri Bootheel where African Americans were living in 1910, according to census manuscript data. The districts are shaded according to population concentration. The non-shaded districts indicate that there were no African Americans living in those areas at the time of the census. The Little River, which roughly bisects the region, was widely considered a racial “dead line,” west of which African American were not allowed to live or work.

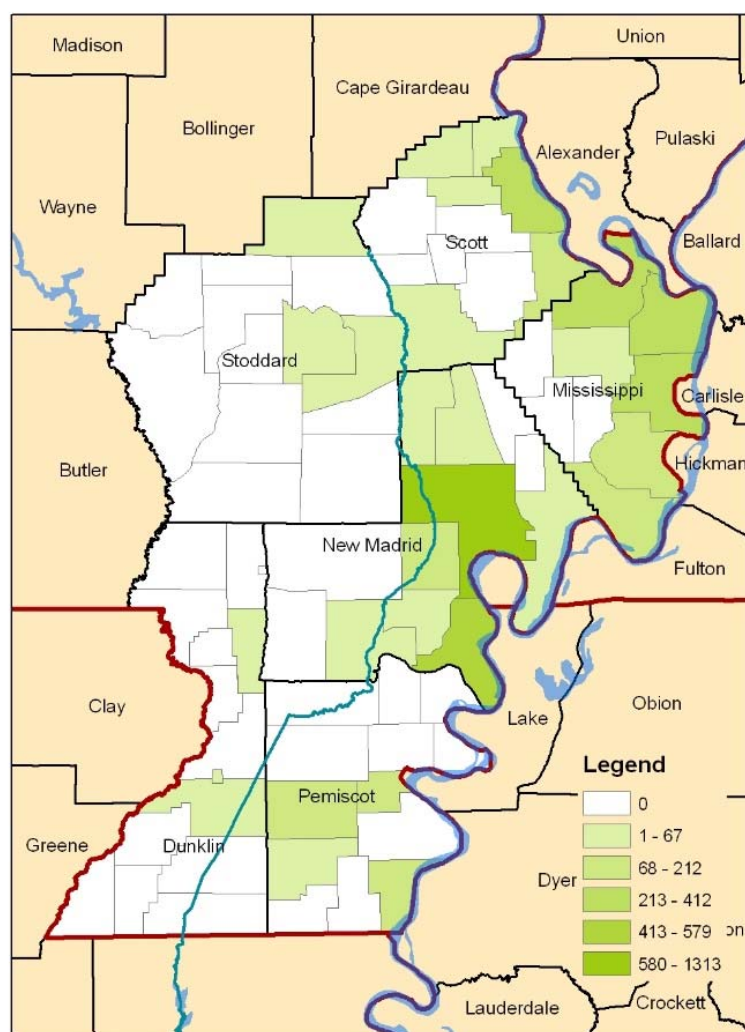
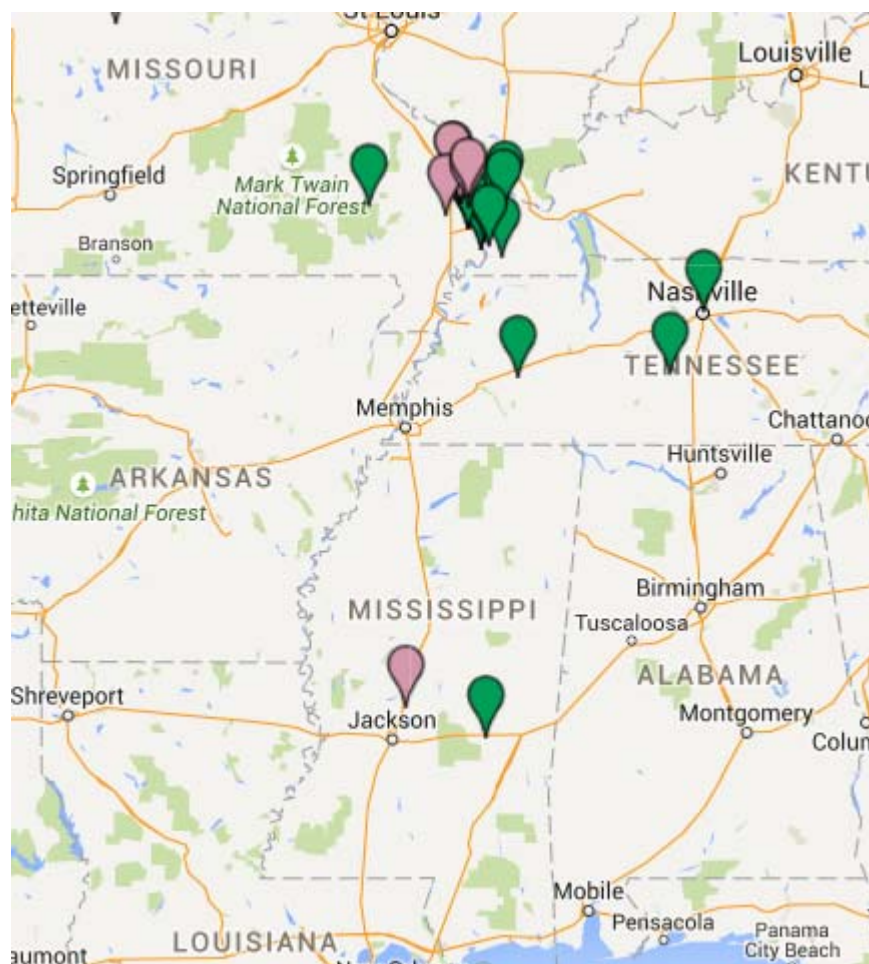


Figure 6. This map shows the birthplace of African American men living in Pemiscot and Dunklin Counties in 1917 and 1918.



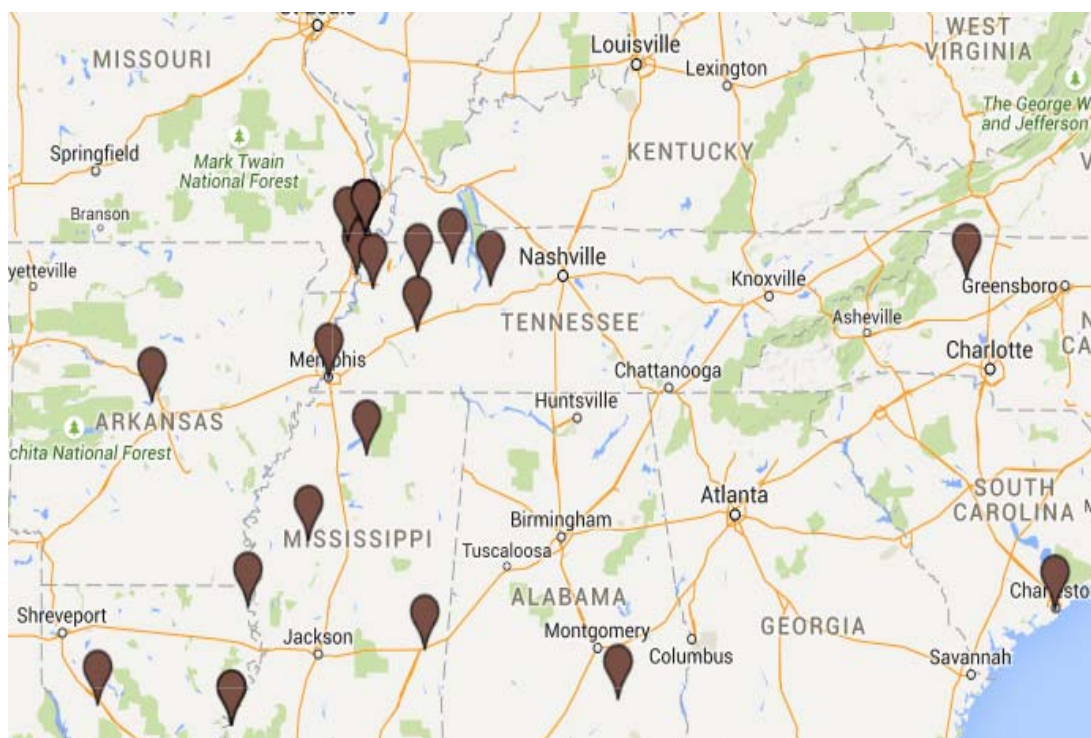
Source: Ancestry.com., U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 [database online], Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2005. The data provided is a sample of the total number of African American registrants. The map was created with Google Maps.

Figure 7. This map shows the birthplace of African American men living in Scott and Mississippi Counties in 1917 and 1918.



Source: Ancestry.com., U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 [database on-line], 2005. The data provided is a sample of the total number of African American registrants. The maps was created with Google Maps.

Figure 8. This map shows the birthplace of African American men living in New Madrid County in 1917 and 1918.



Source: Ancestry.com., U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 [database online], 2005. The data provided is a sample of the total number of African American registrants. The maps was created with Google Maps.

Figure 9. This map indicates the birth place of about half of the accused night riders. The tear drop-shaped markers indicate town or county of birth. The stars indicate that only state of birth could be determined. Google Maps generated the specific location for county or state.



Source: Census and other biographical data obtained from Ancestry.com

CHAPTER 2

BLACK COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND VIOLENCE IN TOWNS, 1880-1922

Economic and physical changes in the Bootheel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century transformed African American community development in towns as well as rural areas. Most community growth took place in towns near the Mississippi River, such as Charleston, New Madrid, and Caruthersville, which had longstanding Black populations. African Americans during this period were excluded from many of the newer towns formed as a result of railroad and lumber industry expansion, especially in the western counties of the Bootheel.¹⁷³ As a result, they took advantage of greater occupational diversity and population growth in towns like New Madrid to expand their social, religious, and educational institutions. The period between 1880 and 1920 was one of urbanization in the river counties of the Bootheel, when the percentage of the Black county population living in towns increased. It was between 1880 and 1920 that spatially identifiable African American neighborhoods developed. The percentage of African Americans living in white households as domestic servants dropped significantly as more families moved into their own homes, even though many retained service-oriented jobs, such as washerwoman, cook, or laundress.¹⁷⁴

African Americans built new Black churches, schools, businesses, and homes near each

¹⁷³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Population, Incorporated Places, Missouri, Table 1 - Population of Incorporated Places: 1910, 1900, 1890; Ancestry.com, *1910 U.S. Federal Census*, Hayti, Pemiscot, MO. There were some very small Black communities in towns that were distant from the Mississippi River. In 1910 there were 49 African Americans out of a total population of 3,033 in Kennett. In Sikeston in 1910 there were 71 African Americans out of 3,327 persons. In Hayti, Pemiscot County, the Black population between 1900 and 1910 grew from 2 to 60.

¹⁷⁴ The Black population dropped significantly between 1910 and 1920, likely the result of economic opportunities in northern cities during World War I. The population rebounded during the following decade, but its growth was outpaced by that of rural areas after a large migration of Black farm families from further South in 1923. At the turn of the century, there were no cities in the Bootheel, defined by the census as places with 2,500 persons, but growth between 1900 and 1920 changed this status.

other in a designated part of town. This neighborhood concentration was shaped by a system of racial apartheid that became more delineated over time, as whites increasingly dictated where African Americans could rent and own property. Like many southern towns, Black and white residential patterns were fairly mixed in the nineteenth century, with Black servants living in or behind white homes. As African American service workers moved into their own homes, however, and towns expanded through neighborhood additions, prominent whites usually designated a specific town addition for African Americans. Operating within the geographical constraints imposed by whites, African Americans were drawn to these neighborhoods because of homeownership and rental opportunities, and a desire to be close to Black community institutions. In the early years of twentieth-century town development, in New Madrid, Caruthersville, and Charleston, working-class whites also lived in the part of town where African Americans were concentrated, but racial apartheid became increasingly delineated over time.¹⁷⁵

During the same period of Black residential and institutional expansion, African Americans experienced significant violence at the hands of whites. Unlike the night riding and rural expulsions taking place in rural areas, lynching was the dominant form of mob violence in towns. Between 1902 and 1913, whites lynched six African Americans, and nearly lynched four to five more individuals, primarily in the towns of Charleston, New Madrid, and Caruthersville. Prior to 1902, there were no documented lynchings of African Americans in the Bootheel. This is unusual given that in the South, lynching peaked in the early 1890s, and in neighboring

¹⁷⁵ Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 26-42; "Sikeston Means to Segregate Blacks," *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, December 7, 1923. In Sikeston, for example, in 1923 the Chamber of Commerce designated the Sunset Addition as the area where African Americans should live. They did not have a legal method of enforcing this, since the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917) had ruled segregation ordinances unconstitutional. White residents, however, publicly criticized individuals who violated this form of town apartheid, and threatened African Americans with violence if they sought to live elsewhere.

Kentucky the Reconstruction period was extremely violent. It is very possible, as historian George C. Wright has noted, that some of the violence which took place in rural areas was not reported in newspapers.¹⁷⁶

Lynching, while ostensibly carried out to punish an individual's alleged crime or transgression of white supremacy, were intended to terrorize entire Black communities and remind African Americans not to get out of their place in the racial hierarchy.¹⁷⁷ Why, then, did the number of lynchings in this part of the Bootheel jump so dramatically during this period? This chapter argues that the prevalence of lynching in the river counties of the Bootheel reflected their southern character, which was rooted in migration patterns, a history of slavery, and paternalistic relationships between African Americans and whites. The first two decades of the twentieth century were years of upheaval in these river towns, as rural industry expanded and African Americans from other parts of the South migrated north to work in lumber and associated industries. Lynching was triggered by African Americans' alleged insults or attacks on prominent white men and white women, which reflected white anxieties about the weakening of paternalistic ties, Black community growth and autonomy, crime, and conflicts over town space. These anxieties were exacerbated by state and national events, including African American mobilizations to defeat state Jim Crow laws.

This chapter also argues that the increasing spatial concentration of African Americans in town, while a result of racial apartheid, strengthened Black social networks, and facilitated

¹⁷⁶ Harriet C. Frazier, *Lynchings in Missouri, 1803-1981* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 149-51, 158-61; George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 2-5. In this dissertation, I define the Bootheel as Pemiscot, Scott, New Madrid, Dunklin, Mississippi, and Stoddard Counties. Butler County, on the edge of the Ozarks, is sometimes included in regional definitions. There was a lynching in Poplar Bluff in Butler County in 1890. See "A Negro Lynched," *The Topeka (KS) Daily Capital*, September 4, 1890.

¹⁷⁷ George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 10.

institution-building and protest politics. Black communities' resistance to white violence included out-migration, voting, community building, and protest through the press and the NAACP.

This chapter looks at the simultaneous growth of Black town communities, and whites' use of lynching as a form of racial terror, in order to explore how these phenomena were connected. Looking at community development and violence, along with state and national level racial politics, provides an opportunity to examine two important issues. First, it provides a localized understanding of lynching in a border region that was on the periphery of the New Cotton South. Much scholarship on lynching in the South has focused on the Deep South where cotton was the dominant cash crop and African Americans were the majority of the population.¹⁷⁸ Studies of lynching have recently expanded into the West and Midwest, but there is still work to be done on violence in Border South areas and the social and economic structure of Black communities.¹⁷⁹

In the Missouri Bootheel, farmers grew cotton in New Madrid and Pemiscot Counties, but they grew far greater quantities of corn and wheat. The production of cotton did, however, increase over time. The percentage of African Americans in the river counties during this period never surpassed 25 percent, and between 1900 and 1910 it dropped below 15 percent. Research

¹⁷⁸ E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930," *American Sociological Review* 55, no 4 (August 1990): 526-39; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, in *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), argues for the importance of looking at lynching over time and across space, and thus compares Virginia, on the edge of the South, and Georgia, in the Deep South; Dominic J. Capeci Jr. in *The Lynching of Cleo Wright*, looks at a lynching in Sikeston, Missouri, in 1942.

¹⁷⁹ Works on lynching outside the South include Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration,'" 591-629; Michael J. Pfeiffer, *Rough Justice: Lynching in American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Pfeiffer, Michael J., ed. *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Frazier, *Lynchings in Missouri*; George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 1. Wright looks at a Border South state, but argues that outside of major cities like Louisville and Lexington, race relations were more like the Deep South.

suggests that while lynching in the Deep South correlates with a majority Black population, in the Border South, lynching rates were highest when the county Black population was below 15 percent.¹⁸⁰ At the same time, the towns and counties along the Mississippi River were culturally southern because of the history of slavery, and because most African Americans and whites who settled in the area in the nineteenth century were from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina.¹⁸¹

Second, this chapter opens a window into how African Americans shaped town development in the Bootheel.¹⁸² Existing scholarship on the Black experience in the Missouri Bootheel has focused on rural activism and migration from the Deep South in the 1920s, when cotton became the dominant crop. This migration was transformative, as subsequent chapters will reveal. However, it was between 1880 and 1922 that a solid bedrock of Black institution building and neighborhood development took shape, and this growth was concentrated between 1900 and 1922. The churches, lodges, and spaces of leisure built during these years provided a

¹⁸⁰ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1880, Statistics of Agriculture, Table XI, 196-97, and Table XIII, 232-33; Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1910 U. S. Census, Agriculture, vol. 6, part 1, Missouri, Table 4, 928-38; *1900-1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>; In 1879, New Madrid County produced 1,116,696 bushels of corn, 49,273 bushels of wheat, and 1,649 bales of cotton. By 1909, cotton production had increased to 5,600 bales, but it was not until 1923 that cotton production jumped dramatically. Jay Corzine, James Crech, and Lin Corzine, "Black Concentration and Lynching in the South: Testing Blalock's Power-Threat Hypothesis," *Social Forces* 61, no. 2 (March 1983): 774-96.

¹⁸¹ Ancestry.com, *1860 U.S. Federal Census*, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1880 and 1900 U.S. Federal Census*, Stoddard, MO; Hudson, "Middlewestern Frontier Populations," 395-413. Hudson used data from around 1880, to show that southern Missouri was primarily settled by people originally from the North Carolina Piedmont, who had moved on to the east and central Tennessee, before moving to Missouri, Arkansas, Southern Illinois, and even East Texas. My census research showed many also came through Kentucky. In 1860, for example, about 28 percent of whites living in Mississippi County, Missouri were born in Kentucky.

¹⁸² Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, in his article "A Warlike Demonstration," critiques the absence of research on organizations in Black communities, their role in resistance and self-defense, and the lack of information on lynching victims. At the same time, he cautions about categorizing all Black actions as resistance. A group of sociologists have developed a new database that uses census and other records to provide greater understanding of the identity of lynch victims. See Amy Kate Bailey et al. "Personalizing Lynch Victims: A New Database to Support the Study of Mob Violence," *Historical Methods* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 47-61.

framework for institutional and organizational expansion after the migration of 1923, and they facilitated connections between town and country.

In order to show the relationship between Black community building and protest, and white violence, this chapter looks first at the growth of the Black population in towns. Next, it analyzes the lynching of Louis F. Wright in New Madrid, Tom Witherspoon in Mississippi County, and the near-lynching of Louis Hicks in New Madrid, within the context of Black Missourians' battles against whites' efforts to expand Jim Crow laws, as well as the national context of increasingly virulent racism. In order to understand the intersection of race and town space, the next section looks at African Americans' changing occupational structures, homeownership, and whites' implementation of a system of racial apartheid. Finally, this chapter analyzes several more violent incidents concentrated around 1910 and 1911, as well as the growth of Black resistance to white oppression, expressed through out-migration, the establishment of a Black newspaper, and the formation of an NAACP chapter.

African American Population and Institutional Growth

In June of 1900, Black residents of the town of New Madrid gathered to mark the end of the first year of classes held in the newly constructed O'Bannon School. The edifice was "beautiful brick with graded departments," which marked significant progress from the "little frame house" that formerly served the school. A newspaper article reporting on the event noted that Rev. L. H. Brown, principal of the school and minister at Beebe's Chapel (C.M.E.), was largely responsible for its construction and "almost a year ago when it was almost worth a man's life to speak up for a Negro, he stood at his post like a man pleading for justice and fair play."

Rev. Brown also oversaw the construction of a “fine brick church, second to none in Southern Missouri.” The dedication stone from this 1899 brick church, and a newer version built in 1984, are shown in Figure 10. Residents were proud of the new buildings and praised the “high-class” program held at the end of the year; a program “beautifully and successfully carried out, notwithstanding the many disadvantages colored people are laboring under in this river city...”¹⁸³

African Americans had lived in New Madrid since the late eighteenth century, but the early twentieth century was an era of significant Black community and institutional growth. The rural Black population in the county stayed fairly level between 1880 and 1920, but the town population grew steadily. In 1880 there were 142 African Americans in the town of New Madrid, and by 1910 there were 717 persons. Black communities in two other major towns, Charleston and Caruthersville, also experienced growth, as seen in Tables 1 and 2. In 1880 there were 194 African Americans in Charleston, and by 1910 this number had grown to 719. In Caruthersville, there were 260 African Americans in 1900, and a decade later there were 687, an increase of 164 percent.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ “Spicy Notices,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 9, 1900. The picture of O’Bannon School shows that it was in a low-lying flood plain. Much of New Madrid was vulnerable to flooding by the Mississippi River and attached streams and bayous. Eventually a levee was built that provided more protection.

¹⁸⁴ Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO; Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, Tywappity, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, Little Prairie, Pemiscot, MO; Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO; Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Charleston, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Caruthersville, Pemiscot, MO. Caruthersville was not enumerated separately in the 1880 census, and the manuscripts for 1890 were burned in a fire. Most compiled population statistics for small towns were not broken down by race, so this data was taken from the manuscript censuses.

Table 1. Population of African Americans in Three Bootheel Towns, 1880-1920

Town	1880	1900	1910	1920
New Madrid	142	501	717	560
Charleston	194	422	719	520
Caruthersville	N/A	260	687	1,179

Table 2. Percent of County Black Populations Living in Three Bootheel Towns, 1880-1920

Town	County	1880	1900	1910	1920
New Madrid	New Madrid	7.5	24.7	34.2	28.7
Charleston	Mississippi	9.0	18.6	35.8	39.7
Caruthersville	Pemiscot		30.2	44.8	30.5

The new buildings for the O'Bannon School and Beebe Chapel C.M.E. Church in New Madrid represented the spiritual and educational aspirations of the Black community in New Madrid and the surrounding area, but they were also the culmination of earlier growth that began in the surrounding countryside. The C.M.E. church was formed after the Civil War in the "Tick Ridge" neighborhood, southeast of New Madrid. It was moved later to the property of Black landowners Joe McCoy and his wife, and it took the name Saint Joe Methodist Church. In 1885, it moved to the town of New Madrid where a new frame church building was constructed. It was named Beebe Memorial C.M.E. Church after Bishop Joseph A. Beebe. The first school for African Americans in New Madrid was started in 1862 as a one room shack by a white man from Massachusetts. He was probably associated with a philanthropic organization like the American

Missionary Association, which had a presence in Missouri as early as 1850.¹⁸⁵ In 1892, even though the Black school in New Madrid was located in a small frame building, Professor Williams held a “Teacher’s school” for the district. This event was designed to help train teachers in rural areas, and it reflected the fact that teachers in New Madrid had ambitions to make their school a regional leader in Black education. Their dreams were realized when they were able to pressure the town to build the much larger O’Bannon brick school, which became a teacher training site for the entire Southeast Missouri region.¹⁸⁶

Rev. L. H. Brown, one of the leaders in getting the school and church built, was originally from Kentucky and his wife Ella was from Georgia. Both were born soon after the end of the Civil War and grew up during Reconstruction, when African Americans in the South for a short period were able to hold political office, vote, and experience full citizenship. As adults, they saw the violent erosion of these rights. Kentucky was a particularly violent place during this period, which may have led to the Brown family’s decision to relocate to Missouri. In addition to the C.M.E. Church in New Madrid, there was a Freewill Baptist Church (likely Mt. Pisgah). Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, organized in Ristine, Missouri, moved to New Madrid in 1922.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ “A History of the O’Bannon Grade and High School,” *Howardville News Reporter* (Howardville, MO), January 1976; Rev. Myra Jones, “History of Beebe Memorial C.M.E. Church,” *Howardville News Reporter* (Howardville, MO), January 1976; W. G. Kephart to George Whipple, August 27, 1850, American Missionary Association Archives, No. 73253, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana; Joe M. Richardson, “The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Civil War Missouri,” *Missouri Historical Review* 69, no. 4 (July 1975): 433-48. Richardson does not list New Madrid as a site of A.M.A. schools up to 1870, so it is likely the teacher in 1862 had another affiliation. The A.M.A. did operate a common school in New Madrid in 1872. *The Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting* (New York: American Missionary Association, 1872), 71.

¹⁸⁶ “New Madrid, Mo.” *Indianapolis Freeman*, 8 Oct 1892.

¹⁸⁷ Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, “Rev. L. H. and Ella Brown,” New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 13A; “New Madrid, Mo.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 17, 1892; Photograph of Mt. Pisgah Freewill Baptist Church sign, in possession of the author, 2006; “Mount Olive M. B. Church Began at Ristine in 1919,” *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), March 18, 1966.

While churches and schools were at the center of daily life, Black businesses and fraternal lodges and halls were also important sites for the expansion of social and economic support networks, so critical to survival, particularly for relatively small Black populations surrounded by white majorities. In 1892, a new masonic hall was built in New Madrid.¹⁸⁸ It is not clear which organization built the hall, but the Knights of Pythias, and the associated Order of Calanthe for women, had a strong presence in St. Louis, Missouri and Bootheel towns. Other organizations established in the region included the Mosaic Templars, Order of Odd Fellows, African American Ancient and Free Accepted Masons (A. F. & A. M.), Knights and Daughters of Tabor, and the Ancient United Order Knights and Daughters of Africa. The Mosaic Templars order was started in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1882, but had expanded to Missouri by 1902. These organizations offered members economic and social benefits, such as financial support during illness, burial insurance, occasions for socializing and networking, and opportunities to develop leadership skills.¹⁸⁹

The number of independent Black businesses in New Madrid in 1880 was small, but that had changed by the 1890s. There were two Black-owned boarding houses, a pool room, a

¹⁸⁸ "New Madrid, Mo." *Indianapolis Freeman*, 20 August 1892.

¹⁸⁹ Valerie Grim, "African American Rural Culture, 1900-1950," in *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950*, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 121-22; Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshal Ganz, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1-5, 24-5; "Out of Town News," *St. Louis Argus*, April 15, 1921, May 6, 1921, June 7, 1921, June 10, 1921, November 18, 1921, December 16, 1921, December 23, 1921, March 31, 1922; A. E. Bus and P. L. Dorman, *History of the Mosaic Templars of America: Its Founders and Officials* (1924), 161, http://www.mosaictemplarspreservation.org/history_mosaic/history.pdf; Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips, *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012). The Mosaic Templars started in Little Rock in 1882, then spread to Alabama and Georgia with Missouri next in 1902; Later, it spanned the Midwest and expanded to Central America. The Knights of Pythias of North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, was chartered in Vicksburg, Mississippi. African Americans had been excluded from the original Knights of Pythias established by whites in 1864. The organization had a strong presence in Missouri by the early twentieth century. The Knights and Daughters of Tabor, and the Knights and Daughters of Africa, were founded in Missouri.

confectionary and ice cream parlor, and a restaurant. W. H. Robinson, who traveled around the area repairing stoves, opened a shop in 1892 and was still in business in 1900.¹⁹⁰ There was also Black Republican political organization in the region, although information is scant. In 1892, Rev. McKune visited New Madrid as deputy chairman of the Southeast Missouri Republican Committee of the Afro-American post. A year later, Dr. William Davis visited his home town, where he was described as “an aggressive, fearless worker in the Republican Party, having taken his life in his hands for the G. O. P. [Republican Party].”¹⁹¹

Similar community expansion took place in Charleston, where African Americans built the Lincoln School just after the turn of the century, and in Caruthersville where they constructed the Booker T. Washington School. In Charleston, Charley Cotton opened an ice cream parlor, Gene “Kid” Howard ran a hotel and restaurant, and Allen Goodin, also a teacher, built a hotel. The fact that Charleston and New Madrid had at least two hotels, or boarding houses, indicates that the number of African Americans traveling through these towns was fairly significant, and that there was a growing need for lodging for temporary Black workers in the lumber industry and cotton fields. Both towns were located on major railway routes. In Charleston, two branches of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern intersected, and New Madrid was an important river terminus for the St. Louis Southwestern Railway, or Cotton Belt. Both railroads connected these Bootheel towns to St. Louis and other parts of the South.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ “New Madrid, Mo.,” *The Indianapolis Freeman*, July 30, 1892; “New Madrid, Mo.,” *The Indianapolis Freeman*, August 20, 1892; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, New Madrid Ward 2, New Madrid, MO, p. 8B; The article in *The Freeman* reported three churches in New Madrid in 1892: C. M. E., Free Will Baptist, and MBT.

¹⁹¹ “New Madrid, Mo.,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 8, 1892; “A Worthy Career,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 7, 1893.

¹⁹² “Notes, Charleston, Mo., special,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 28, 1898; Map of New Madrid, Missouri, July 1911, no. 1; Map of Charleston, Missouri, August 1900, no. 1, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Missouri Collection, University of Missouri Libraries, <http://library.missouri.edu/specialcollections/bookcol/sanborn/#n>.

White Mob Violence, Black Self-Defense, and Challenges to White Supremacy, 1902-1906

Just three years after the Black residents of New Madrid built a new brick school and church, symbols of social and economic growth, white residents lynched Louis F. Wright, an African American trombonist and performer who had come to New Madrid to perform with Richard and Pringles' Famous Georgia Minstrels. His transgression was armed defense of himself and his fellow performers, when after a show, a group of white men started towards the stage to retaliate for comments during the show and an alleged verbal insult earlier in the day. According to published accounts, on Saturday February 15, 1902, the minstrel group led a parade on Main Street, playing "Dixie" and some "ragtime airs" the afternoon before the performance. This was a common practice designed to "defuse tensions" before the show.¹⁹³ After playing, most of the performance troupe dispersed, but some decided to explore the town. According to the local newspaper, as they passed the courthouse, two young white men, Richard Mott and Thomas Waters, were having a snowball fight and one of the snowballs landed near Wright, who turned to Waters and said "You dirty son of a b----." ¹⁹⁴ Another news account said several of the performers, flashily dressed, paraded the streets of the town and became the target for the gibes and the snowballs of young men and boys on the streets."¹⁹⁵ The town marshal diffused the situation, telling Mott and Waters to go home, and suggesting the members of the minstrel troupe

¹⁹³ Edward Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 124; Charleea H. Williams "Recent Developments in the Land of the Free," *Colored American Magazine* 5, no. 4 (August 1902): 284-93.

¹⁹⁴ "Man Lynched," *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), March 18, 1966. This article is a reprint of the original, published February 22, 1902.

¹⁹⁵ "Riot in Theater Leads to Lynching of Negro Minstrel," *St. Louis Republican*, February 18, 1902.

get off the streets to avoid more trouble.¹⁹⁶

Later that night, during the show at the opera house, a verbal exchange between the performers and the audience became heated. After the show concluded, and while the theater was still crowded with people, about six to eight white men started toward the stage to get to Wright. Their intention was to give him a beating, or force him to apologize for his insult that afternoon. They first grabbed the wrong person, a man named Shields. Another performer, later identified as Wright, saw this and fired a shot at the men. The group of men included Tom Waters, Clay Hunter, who received a minor scalp wound, Hal Hunter, and Wint Lewis, all from elite white New Madrid families. Chaos ensued, with Blacks and whites exchanging fire. One member of the minstrel troupe was shot in the leg, and a bullet passed through the clothing of a woman, Miss McClelland. The entire troupe was arrested by Sheriff Stone and a posse and put in jail, charged with rioting.¹⁹⁷

The following day, on Sunday February 16, “groups of men collected on the street corners, discussing the shooting.” Around 11 or 12 that night, five masked men went to the jail, overpowered the sheriff, the jailer, and another man, and grabbed Wright.¹⁹⁸ According to a report in the *Colored American Magazine*, “When the vigilantes appeared with the prisoner outside the jail, a terrible shout went up from that maddened crowd. A rope was thrown over the limb of a tree, a noose formed and slipped over Wright's head, and half a hundred pairs of hands seized hold of the other end and drew the victim into the air - then the rope was securely fastened

¹⁹⁶ “Riot in Theater Leads to Lynching of Negro Minstrel,” *St. Louis Republican*, February 18, 1902; “Lynching of Wright at New Madrid,” *St. Louis Republican*, March 9, 1902.

¹⁹⁷ “Man Lynched,” *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), March 18, 1966. This article is a reprint of the original, published February 22, 1902; “Lynching of Wright at New Madrid,” *St. Louis Republican*, March 9, 1902.

¹⁹⁸ “Riot in Theater Leads to Lynching of Negro Minstrel,” *St. Louis Republican*, February 18, 1902.

to the tree, the body being left to swing until morning.”¹⁹⁹ The *St. Louis Republican* published two articles on the lynching, one of which was submitted by New Madrid whites. Much more detailed, it indicated the mob was made of forty to fifty men and that the lynching took place on the edge of town, specifically “from the limb of a big elm tree which stands by the Big Prairie road, just north of the railroad tracks on the edge of town.”²⁰⁰ Big Prairie road was an old name for Route 61, or the King’s Highway, which was a major north-south thoroughfare between St. Louis and Memphis. It was also called Hatcher Avenue.²⁰¹ The large oval symbol in Figure 11 in the western half of town, just north of the railroad tracks, indicates where Wright may have been lynched, based on newspaper descriptions.

One can only speculate about why that specific spot was chosen. Lynchings in towns or cities were often carried out in Black neighborhoods to terrorize or send a message to other African Americans. In 1902, there was not a distinct, segregated Black neighborhood in New Madrid, but African Americans lived on Hatcher Avenue, also called Kingshighway, as well as along the St. Louis Southwestern Railroad on the northern edge of town. Moreover, because this road was commonly traveled and bordered rural areas, the perpetrators of the lynchings may have wanted to intimidate African Americans outside New Madrid as well as to those living in town. Hundreds of people saw Wright’s body before it was cut down the next morning.²⁰²

As with most lynchings, the perpetrators were not identified. It is clear from the course

¹⁹⁹ Williams “Land of the Free,” 284-93.

²⁰⁰ “Riot in Theater Leads to Lynching of Negro Minstrel,” *St. Louis Republican*, February 18, 1902; “Lynching of Wright at New Madrid,” *St. Louis Republican*, March 9, 1902.

²⁰¹ H. Riley Bock, “History of New Madrid’s Street Names,” <http://www.new-madrid.mo.us/index.aspx?NID=127>.

²⁰² Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO; “Man Lynched,” *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), March 18, 1966; “Lynching of Wright at New Madrid,” *St. Louis Republican*, March 9, 1902.

of events, however, that Wright or another African American in the minstrel troupe challenged the authority of white men from prominent families, not once, but twice in very public settings. In defending himself and his fellow performers, he had also endangered many white people in the theater. An article composed by New Madrid citizens emphasized this offense, stating “The hanging of the negro is to be regretted from a humanitarian standpoint, but is condoned by a majority of the citizens, as the crime...was a grave one, and only by a miracle were the deaths, or murders, of several of our citizens averted.”²⁰³

Richard Mott, one of the white men who threw snowballs at minstrel performers on Main Street, was from a family that had moved to New Madrid from Kentucky in the 1850s. Mott’s father was the clerk and recorder of the New Madrid County Circuit Court. In 1900, Mott was a bookkeeper and lived with his parents, next door to the family of R. J. Waters. Tom Waters was likely related to this Waters family, which had moved to New Madrid from Kentucky at the beginning of American settlement in the 1790s. The social status of these families was inscribed in the landscape of New Madrid through the naming of Mott and Waters Streets. Both Mott and Waters grew up in a southern town, accustomed to deference from African Americans because they were white and hailed from socially prominent families.²⁰⁴

Instead of showing deference to Waters and Mott on the day of the minstrel show, Wright and his fellow performers defended themselves and each other, and showed other African Americans and whites, in a very public way, their ingrained sense of dignity and willingness to

²⁰³ “Lynching of Wright at New Madrid,” *St. Louis Republican*, March 9, 1902.

²⁰⁴ H. Riley Bock, “History of New Madrid’s Street Names,” <http://www.new-madrid.mo.us/index.aspx?NID=127> (originally printed in the New Madrid Weekly Record, October 30, 1988); Robert Sidney Douglass, *History of Southeast Missouri: A Narrative Account of its Historical Progress, its People and its Principal Interests*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1912), 97; Ancestry.com, 1900 U. S. Federal Census, “Richard Mott,” New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 14A.

protect themselves. These were characteristics that flew in the face of Black stereotypes perpetuated in minstrel shows, thus exposing the disjuncture between these stereotypes and reality. If, as one author has written, the parades before minstrel shows, where musicians played “Dixie,” were designed not only for publicity but also to “diffuse tensions” before a show, Wright’s response to the white men ruptured any pretense of Black subservience.²⁰⁵

The public nature of Wright’s actions were significant, for they were likely witnessed by local Black residents, leading whites to fear that African Americans in New Madrid would follow Wright’s example and defend themselves against white harassment and violence. Wright was originally from Ottawa, Kansas, and lived in Chicago where the Richard and Pringles troupe was based. He posed a threat, then, as a stranger to New Madrid. After the lynching, the manager of the troupe, George A. Treyser, told white townspeople that he would remind the Black performers every day that “they were negroes, and in this section of the country citizens would not tolerate negro equality or sociability, and that they must keep their places as negroes.” He noted that they had recently traveled in Canada and the North, where they were treated by whites as equals, and it caused some of them to “take the ‘swell-head.’”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 3-22. There was no description of the content of this minstrel show, but it was an all-Black troupe. Black minstrelsy included racial stereotypes that whites had used in blackface minstrelsy, but as Taylor and Austen note, performances also showcased tremendous artistic talent and the entertainers’ humor could speak to Black audiences in way that whites did not understand. The press coverage of the Wright lynching does not mention African Americans in the audience, but Black troupes sometimes played to mixed, albeit segregated audiences.

²⁰⁶ Ancestry.com, 1880 U. S. Federal Census, “Louis Wright,” Ottawa, ward 2, Franklin, KS, pp. 15-16. In the 1880 Census, Ancestry transcribed “Louis” as “Lanie,” however the original image clearly shows it is Louis; Louis Wright, Lake View Township, Cook County, Illinois, page 16, Ancestry.com; Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 105-110; “Lynching of Wright at New Madrid,” *St. Louis Republican*, March 9, 1902 (Treyser quotes); Amy Kate Bailey et al., “Targeting Lynch Victims: Social Marginality of Status Transgression?” *American Sociological Review*, 76, no. 3 (June 2011): 412-36. Bailey, Tolnay, and Beck argue that lynching victims were often “socially marginal” to the local Black community, as measured by marital status, place of birth, occupation, and other indicators.

The reaction of the Black community in New Madrid to the Wright lynching was not reported in published sources, but it was undoubtedly discussed behind closed doors. There was a great deal of outrage in Chicago, where Wright had made many friends, including musician W. C. Handy, whom he had met while touring with Mahara's Minstrels.²⁰⁷ In May 1902, African Americans, including Ferdinand Barnett, assistant state attorney and husband of anti-lynching activist Ida Wells-Barnett, held a mass meeting at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Chicago to protest Wright's lynching and to raise money to sue New Madrid County.²⁰⁸

The larger social and political context in which Wright's lynching occurred was one of virulent racism against African Americans across the country. In southern states like Mississippi, whites restricted Black mobility, voting rights, access to public spaces, and other markers of citizenship through local laws and a new constitution. In border states like Missouri, the legal restrictions on citizenship rights were not as egregious as in the Deep South, but it was not for lack of trying on the part of many white legislators and citizens. In Missouri, schools were legally segregated through the state constitution, but few other forms of segregation were enshrined in law, even if they were practiced in many places.²⁰⁹

There were factions within the state that tried to harden these lines, but they were not always successful due to mitigating political influences through the Republican Party and some urban coalitions between Blacks and Democratic machine politics. In 1903, two Missouri state

²⁰⁷ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 1104.

²⁰⁸ "Stranger than Fiction," *Plaindealer* (Topeka, Kansas), April 18, 1902; "Predicts a Negro Revolt," *Nevada* (MO) *Daily Mail*, May 24, 1902.

²⁰⁹ Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 3-32; Lorenzo J. Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Antonio F. Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage*, rev. ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 94-102, 104-12.

legislators, Col. John T. Crisp of Kansas City, and Lon B. Williams of Scott County (in the Bootheel), introduced bills to establish separate streetcar and railroad cars for African Americans. This prompted a heated battle in which African Americans mobilized in opposition through mass meetings, protests during legislative sessions, and extensive coverage in newspapers. On February 3, people from across the state traveled to Jefferson City, where they met at the A.M.E. Church and organized a committee to speak before the House Committee on Railroads.²¹⁰

The separate car bill was defeated, with fifty-five votes for, and seventy votes against the measure. All Republican legislators voted against the bill, as did some Democrats, revealing fractures in the Democratic Party statewide, falling along rural/urban lines. Many white Democrats in the Bootheel were frustrated with the Republican Party and its historical support of African American rights, so much that after Theodore Roosevelt won Missouri in the 1904 election, Democrats in Dunklin and Pemiscot Counties declared their wish to secede from Missouri and be annexed to Arkansas.²¹¹

On a national level, African Americans organized for better economic, political, and educational opportunities. Journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a powerful voice in anti-lynching protest. Black sociologist W. E. B. DuBois used academic research to combat scientific ideas about Black inferiority, as well as popular representations of Blacks as “sambos,” or criminals,

²¹⁰ “Jim Crow Cars for Missouri,” *Plainealer* (Topeka, KS), January 23, 1903; “Williams is Dead. The Real Author of the Jim Crow Car Bill in the Missouri Legislature Passes Away,” *St. Louis Palladium*, December 5, 1903; “Negroes Will Protest,” *American Citizen* (Kansas City, KS), January 30, 1903; “The Jim Crow Car Bill,” *St. Louis Palladium*, February 7, 1903.

²¹¹ Greene, Kremer, and Holland, *Missouri’s Black Heritage*, 112; “‘Jim Crow’ Bill Defeated by a Vote of 55 to 70,” *St. Louis Palladium*, March 14, 1903; “Threat of Secession in Dunklin and Pemiscot,” *Kansas City Star*, November 19, 1904.

all of which undergirded white justifications for violence against African Americans. Both Wells-Barnett and Du Bois helped found the NAACP in 1909.²¹²

In 1905, whites in the Bootheel lynched another man, Tom Witherspoon of Mississippi County, and in 1906, Louis Hicks, of New Madrid was nearly lynched, but managed to escape. Like the Louis F. Wright lynching, both incidents involved attacks on prominent white men. The May 12, 1905 lynching of Tom Witherspoon took place on the public square of Belmont, Missouri, a village on the Mississippi River, across from Columbus, Kentucky. Witherspoon had recently gotten out of the Missouri State Penitentiary after serving time for the attempted murder of his wife. He held Ferdinand (Fred) Hess, a former state legislator from Mississippi County, responsible for his imprisonment. He allegedly confronted him and demanded \$600, saying “You were a witness against me and helped send me to the penitentiary and you owe me \$600 for it, and I want it right now.” Witherspoon took Hess’s wife and child hostage while Hess went to get the money in Columbus, Kentucky, where he notified authorities. Hess took the money to Witherspoon, in Missouri, who then escaped and was hunted down by authorities. He was taken to Belmont, where a mob had gathered, and he was lynched.²¹³

Marshal Zimmerman, of Columbus, Kentucky, allegedly “tried to protect the negro.” County Prosecuting Attorney Joslyn, from Charleston, said that “but few Missourians were engaged in the lynching and that quite all were from Kentucky.”²¹⁴ While undoubtedly some

²¹² Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases* (New York Age, 1892); Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 1-15; Robert A. Wortham, ed. *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Sociological Imagination: A Reader, 1897-1914* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

²¹³ Frazier, *Lynchings in Missouri*, 150-151. Further research into Witherspoon’s imprisonment and trial may shed more light on why he had a particular grievance with Hess’s testimony against him.

²¹⁴ “Negro Lynched!” *Scott County Kicker* (Benton, MO), May 20, 1905.

mob participants were from Kentucky, Hess and his family lived in Missouri at that time and were well-known on a local and state level. Once word spread of the incident, it is highly likely that whites in Missouri joined the mob, particularly since the deputy sheriff and posse pursuing Witherspoon were from Charleston.²¹⁵ Although the events leading up to this lynching were quite different than those in New Madrid in 1902, both involved an alleged attack on prominent white men (although Wright attacked in self-defense).

On February 10, 1906, the near-lynching of Louis Hicks in New Madrid, reminiscent of Louis F. Wright's murder, began with an argument between Hicks and a white man, Edward Waters, a member of a very prominent family in New Madrid.²¹⁶ Both Hicks and Waters were at Bellon's saloon late on a Saturday night, but the saloon was segregated into separate areas for whites and for Blacks. When the saloon closed, African Americans went out the back door, and Waters went out the front. Waters waited for his friend, Charles Bell, but when Bell came out he found Waters "in an altercation with a negro." None of the newspapers reported what the argument was about. Bell, "to protect Waters from a fight...struck the negro over the head with a bottle of whiskey he carried, breaking the bottle." This left Hicks with a large gash over his eye. Hicks shot at Bell, but missed, then shot Waters, and ran. Waters died the following Monday night.²¹⁷

Initially, authorities suspected either Bob or Tom Hicks, Louis's brothers. They hid, but then turned themselves in, providing alibis. Bob told authorities that Louis had come by his house bleeding, and said he'd been in a fight. After that, Sheriff Henry and a group of men,

²¹⁵ Frazier, *Lynchings in Missouri*, 150.

²¹⁶ I use the term "near-lynching" because newspapers reported that some whites were advocating a lynching if Hicks was captured. There is no way to know if mob violence actually would have taken place.

²¹⁷ "A Sad Tragedy," *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), February 17, 1906.

including a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* correspondent, and Town Marshal, L. A. Richards searched for Hicks in the countryside. They tracked him to Henry and Florence Renfro's cabin, where he had rested and changed clothes.²¹⁸ Fortunately, he was not found, for many white residents were determined "that Hicks will be lynched as soon as he is captured."²¹⁹ The social status of Edward Waters, "a member of one of the most prominent families in Southeast Missouri," was stressed in all the newspapers, indicating that this was a particular source of outrage. Waters' father was the County Collector, and had previously been Sheriff. The Waters family had been in New Madrid for many generations, and Edward may have been related to the Tom Waters who harassed Louis F. Wright in 1902.²²⁰

Louis Hicks grew up in New Madrid, and his geographical knowledge of the area, and social networks with other African Americans, helped him escape authorities. Census records suggest possible kinship between the Hicks family and Henry and Florence Renfro, with whom Hicks briefly took refuge.²²¹ Louis Hicks and Edward Waters were somewhat acquainted, but not well, for Edward Waters could only identify the person who shot him as "one of the Hicks brothers." Their argument, then, was probably not due to a previous grievance, unless it

²¹⁸ "A Sad Tragedy," *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), February 17, 1906.

²¹⁹ "Hunted Negro is Badly Wounded," *St. Louis-Post Dispatch*, February 14, 1906.

²²⁰ "A Sad Tragedy," *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), February 17, 1906.

²²¹ Ancestry.com, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, "Thomas and Josephine Hicks," New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 15; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "Louis Hicks" and "Phina Hicks," New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 15B; Ancestry.com, *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007*, "Thomas Lawyer Hicks"; Ancestry.com, *1870 U.S. Federal Census*, "Ham and Betsy Renfrow," New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 27; Ancestry.com, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, "Henry and Florence Ann Renfroe," New Madrid, New Madrid, Missouri, p. 17; Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "Henry and Florence Renfro," New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 10B; Henry Renfro, death certificate, May 10, 1936, Missouri Death Certificates, 1910-1964, Missouri Digital Heritage, http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1936/1936_00020871.PDF. Henry Renfro was a farmer in 1900, and was born in New Madrid County before the Civil War, the son of Hampton Renfro. In 1870, Louis Hicks' mother, nineteen-year old Josephine Hicks, along with her infant daughter, were living with Ham (Hampton) and Betsy Renfrow. Moreover, Hampton was Josephine's maiden name.

generally had to do with the Hicks family, but probably came about that night at the saloon. It does appear, however, that the Hicks family had some connections to prominent whites. When Louis's brother Bob turned himself in, he went to Circuit Judge Riley, for whom he worked. This connection may have protected Bob and Tom Hicks when they were initially suspected of the crime, but whether it would have prevented Louis from being lynched if he had been caught is impossible to say.²²²

The class composition of the mob in the Wright and Witherspoon lynchings, and the source of the lynching threats in the Hicks case, are impossible to determine for certain, but they probably included members of the elite, middle, and working classes. Because prominent men were injured, their friends and associates probably took part, not only to avenge injury and threat to someone they knew, but to remind local African Americans that harming a white person, even in self-defense, would not be tolerated. The white working class may have reacted to the perceived affront to white supremacy as well. While these specific incidents of violence towards African Americans were not directly related to labor conflict, white antagonism towards the perceived economic threat of African Americans was pervasive throughout the region.

White fears of Black criminality were also widespread. In these Bootheel river counties, African Americans were frequently prosecuted and convicted through the criminal justice system, so lynching as a response to a weak legal infrastructure does not appear to have been a factor. Lynching may have been seen by all whites, however, as a way to deter future crime and Black self-defense.²²³ Fear of Black crime was exacerbated by changes in town space between 1900 and 1920, which included Black and white population growth, the expansion of industry,

²²² "A Sad Tragedy," *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), February 17, 1906.

²²³ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 53.

and an increase in independent Black households, Black homeownership, and recreational spaces. The fact that Blacks and whites lived and recreated near each other throughout town increasingly became an issue of white concern, as it did in so many towns and cities across the country.²²⁴

The lynching of Louis F. Wright and the pursuit of Louis Hicks in New Madrid were both preceded by conflicts in public spaces. Regarding the fight between Hicks, Edward Water and Charles Bell, there were also newspaper reports that conflated it with a saloon fight among African Americans and the shooting of two other white men later that day. One article stated that three African Americans began fighting in a saloon, and they rushed out “where they began promiscuous firing at each other with revolvers.” Three white men were allegedly shot when they were standing on a corner talking.²²⁵ Other articles, however, separated the fight between Hicks and Waters from the saloon fight and second shooting. Regardless of how events transpired, reports that African Americans were shooting in the streets of New Madrid, with whites murdered or caught in the crossfire, put many white residents in an uproar. One newspaper reported that the men involved in the saloon fight had been arrested, that “feeling against the negroes is intense at New Madrid,” and “there is much talk of a lynching.” A week after the fight between Hicks, Waters, and Bell, an editorial in *The Weekly Record*, the local newspaper for New Madrid, reported that “our people are very indignant over the outrageous and disgraceful crimes” and “the result will be that the law will be rigidly enforced hereafter against persons carrying pistols and keeping disreputable dives.”²²⁶

²²⁴ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 26-42.

²²⁵ “Three Die as a Result of New Madrid Shooting,” *Paducah (KY) Evening Sun*, February 13, 1906.

²²⁶ “Announcements,” *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), February 17, 1906.

Shifts in African Americans' Occupational Structures and Residential Space

White anxieties about Black assertiveness and criminal behavior (and their conflation of the two), were shaped in part by the changing nature of work for African Americans and their use of town space for community building and leisure. One of the reasons for the expansion of the Black town populations in these river counties between 1880 and 1920 was the growth of jobs in factories and mills associated with the lumber industry. The physical expansion of town infrastructure also provided day laborer jobs, and the growing white population increased the number of service positions such as cook or laundress. Between 1880 and 1910, the number of Black servants living in white households dramatically declined. Many African Americans remained in service occupations, but lived in their own households. As Black town populations grew, African Americans were able to establish businesses financially sustained by Black customers. Churches and other social institutions, like masonic lodges, proliferated, and along with the Black school served as physical and social anchors of Black neighborhoods.

In 1880, as was typical in southern towns during the nineteenth century, African Americans in New Madrid and Charleston lived in different parts of the city and were not segregated into one specific neighborhood. In New Madrid, most African American men and women worked as servants, day laborers, or laundresses, and 23 percent of Black residents lived in white households. Emaline Waters, for example, along with her two daughters and a nephew, lived and worked in the home of W. W. Waters, a prominent white physician. The fact that they has the same last name suggests that Emeline or her ancestors may have been enslaved by the Waters family, which had lived in New Madrid since the 1790s.²²⁷

²²⁷ Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO; Ancestry.com, *1880 U. S. Federal Census*, "Emaline Waters," New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p.4.

By 1900, only 3 percent of African Americans in New Madrid lived in white households as servants, a decrease of 20 percent since 1880. Many individuals, particularly women, still made their living in domestic service, as cooks or laundresses, but they lived in their own households.²²⁸ Historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, in her book *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D. C., 1910-1940*, describes the daily life of female domestic servants and the significance of the transition many made, largely between 1900 and 1920, to day work. While their experiences in a large border city differed in important ways from women working in the rural South, key aspects were comparable and can shed light on reasons behind the transition in Bootheel towns.

One important factor that motivated women to switch to day work, either as washerwomen or laundresses, was a desire to participate more fully in community life, through church activities, recreation, and other civic activities. Clark-Lewis notes that women in the rural South had more time for religious activities than in the North, but even if tradition meant an employer allowed time off for attending church, or provided an entire day off, living in the home of the employer still meant that servants could be called on to work when needed. The boundary between work and home life was permeable and not within women's control. Female live-in servants were also extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse by the white men of the house, particularly since in the South the white male head of the household, rather than the female, was in charge of servants' work and living space. This vulnerability remained if women worked in a house during the day, but going home at night reduced men's around-the-clock access to women.²²⁹

²²⁸ Ancestry.com, *1900 U. S. Federal Census*, New Madrid, New Madrid, MO.

²²⁹ Elizabeth Clark-Lewis. *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D. C., 1910-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 48-9, 107-8, 123-26.

Some women who began working as laundresses operated out of their own homes, which provided even more autonomy and independence. They would make the rounds to houses to pick up laundry, and then deliver it when they were done.²³⁰ Many of the women who supported themselves and their children by doing washing and ironing were widows, suggesting that doing laundry was more financially viable than working in white homes. Working from home also provided more flexibility regarding childcare.

Changes in Black employment are reflected in list of occupations from the manuscript censuses for Charleston in 1900 and 1910. The number of men and women enumerated as servants, who lived in white households, remained the same at thirty-five persons, but the percentage decreased relative to the total population. The number of women who lived in Black households and worked as cooks (in private homes, restaurants, and hotels), increased from six to thirty-nine and the number of women doing some form of laundry work increased from sixteen to seventy-six. Women, then, were still limited to service work, but by living out, they had more control over their personal lives, and those who worked from home had more autonomy than those who worked in white homes.

The range of occupations engaged by African American men increased from 1900 to 1910 and reflected an expansion of higher-paying jobs. In 1900, most men who were not servants in white homes worked as general laborers or farm hands. A few worked for the railroad or as teamsters, but by and large they were shut out of industry and trades. By 1910, however, forty-two men worked in factories, mills, for the railroad, or as teamsters or dray

²³⁰ Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 140-46. Clark-Lewis notes that laundresses were different from washerwomen, in that the former had a set group of clients, or families that she worked for outside the home. A washerwoman went from house to house to see if there was any work, but did not know from day-to-day if she would have any business. The position of laundress carried more prestige. In the table below, I combined different forms of laundry work because I was most concerned with the distinction between living-in and living-out.

wagon drivers. Also striking is the emergence of African Americans, although small in number, working in skilled trades, such as dressmaking, hairdressing, painting, plastering, plumbing, and carpentry. The growth of the Black population and homeownership was probably instrumental in supporting these occupations. There was growth in the professions as well. In 1900, no teacher was enumerated in the Charleston census, although certainly there must have been at least one person teaching at Lincoln School. In 1910, the number of Black teachers had grown to seven, the number of ministers had increased from two to five, and there was a resident Black physician.²³¹

Table 3. – Occupations of African Americans in Charleston, Missouri in 1900 and 1910

Occupation	1900	1910
Servant (live-in)	35	35
Servant (live-out)	19	1
Housekeeper (live-in)		3
Cook (live-in)	-	2
Cook (live-out)	6	39
House Boy	-	5
Chambermaid or House maid	-	2
Works for Private Family	-	6
Laundress, Wash & Iron, Laundry Work, Washerwoman	16	76
Washes out or away from home	-	2

²³¹ Ancestry.com, 1900-1910 U. S. Federal Census, Charleston, Mississippi, MO.

Table 3. (cont.)

Family Washing	-	2
Porter (saloon, barbershop, hotel)	4	2
Laborer/Day Laborer	47	59
Farm Hand/Laborer	9	23
Factory and Mill work	-	18
RR (section hand, construction, roundhouse, etc.)	3	10
Teamsters	2	11
Dray Wagon	-	1
Fireman at Plant or Factory	-	2
Teacher	-	7
Physician	-	1
Musician	1	1
Minister	2	5
Bootblack	1	2
Barber	3	6
Hairdresser	-	2
Dressmaker	-	1
Gardener	-	1
Janitor	-	2
Office Boy	-	1
Waiter/Waitress	-	3

Table 3. (cont.)

Nursing/Nurse	-	2
Painter and/or Paper Hanger	-	2
Plasterer	-	3
Plumber	-	1
Electrician	-	1
Soap Maker	-	1
Carpenter	-	1
Farming/Farmer	-	2
Seamstress	-	1
Hotel Keeper/Boarding House	3	1
Grocery Store Proprietor	-	1
Yard Man/Boy	-	2
Mail Messenger	-	1
Hotel Work	-	3
Butcher Boy	-	1
Works in Store	-	3
Total Town Population	422	719

Source: Ancestry.com, 1900-1910 U.S. Federal Census, Charleston, Mississippi, MO.

Most of the members of the professional class had recently moved to Charleston, perhaps attracted by a growth that included the construction of Lincoln School, a four-room school built

after the turn of the century. By the early twentieth century, there were at least three churches in town: Perry Chapel A.M.E. Church., Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, and Mercy Seat Missionary Baptist Church.²³² Most professionals, many of whom were originally from western Kentucky and Tennessee, did not stay in Charleston for long. Rev. Elvie Ernest Treadwell, minister at the A.M.E. Church (likely Perry Chapel), was born in Dyer, Tennessee, but and his wife Georgia moved frequently, probably because of different church appointments. After ministering in Charleston, he lived in Jefferson County near St. Louis, moved south again to Cape Girardeau, and eventually went to Kansas City, Missouri. Rev. Candy Purvis Reddick was from Maury City, Tennessee, and his wife Fannie was from Shelby County near Memphis. They lived in Mississippi County, Arkansas before moving to Charleston, and then returned to Arkansas before settling in Chicago. Teacher Harrison Grant Elam was from Cape Girardeau, less than forty miles away, taught in Charleston for at least nine years, but was living in St. Louis by 1920. Winnie Stroud, a teacher, was the only professional who could be considered local, having grown up in Wolf Island Township, but she also moved to Chicago.²³³

As Table 1 illustrates, a large portion of the Black population of Charleston and New Madrid left between 1910 and 1920 for opportunities elsewhere, particularly in larger cities. Rev. L. H. Brown and his wife Ella, who were instrumental in the expansion of the Beebe

²³² Ancestry.com, 1900 U. S. Federal Census, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, 1910 U.S. Federal Census, Charleston, Mississippi, MO; Gary Kremer and Brett Rogers, *African American Schools in Rural and Small-Town Missouri* (Office of Historic Preservation, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, 2002), 2.

²³³ Ancestry.com, 1920 U. S. Federal Census, "Elvie and Georgia Treadwell," Joachim, Jefferson, MO, p. 9A; Ancestry.com, 1930 U. S. Federal Census, "Elvis and Georgia Treadwell," Cape Girardeau, Cape Girardeau, MO, p. 15B; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Elvie E. and Georgia Treadwell," Lexington, Lafayette, MO, p. 61B; Elvie Earnest Treadwell, Find-A-Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/index.html>; Ancestry.com, 1910 U. S. Federal Census, "Candy P. and Fannie Reddick," Charleston, Mississippi, MO, p. 20A; Ancestry.com, 1920 U. S. Federal Census, "Candy P. and Fannie Reddick," McGavock, Mississippi, AR, p. 10B; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Candy and Fannie Reddick," Chicago, Cook, IL, p. 1A; "Charleston Items," Indianapolis Freeman, November 23, 1901; Ancestry.com, 1900 U. S. Federal Census, "Winnie Strand [Stroud]," Wolf Island, Mississippi, MO, p. 3B; Ancestry.com, 1930 U. S. Federal Census, "Winnie Butler," Chicago, Cook, IL, p. 25A.

Chapel C.M.E. Church and O'Bannon School in New Madrid, had moved to Louisville, Kentucky by 1910. They were part of a migration within the South to urban areas, described by historian Luther Adams. Even though the Browns may have considered the South home, opportunities beckoned further north, and by 1930 they were living in Cleveland, Ohio. This was typical of the Great Migration during the World War I era, when many African Americans left border states like Missouri and Kentucky for northern cities.²³⁴ The migration of African Americans to the Bootheel in 1923, discussed in the next chapter, was different in that a large percentage of the families were farmers rather than laborers or professionals, and they were more likely to remain in the region.

The Implementation of Town Apartheid

The first two decades of the twentieth century were characterized by rapid change and uncertainty because of migration, institutional growth, the expansion of rural industry, economic downturns and two devastating floods in 1912 and 1913. In towns like Charleston and New Madrid, relationships between the white elite and African Americans had long reflected elements of paternalism, due to multi-generational intertwined histories dating back to slavery. Migration, and the transition where domestic servants headed their own households, loosened these ties. These and other factors, such as fears of Black criminality, resulted in whites implementing residential segregation, or apartheid. This was a gradual process. As Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton observe in *American Apartheid*, Jim Crow laws and customs in the South were

²³⁴ Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, "Ella M. and Lewis H. Brown," Louisville, Jefferson, Kentucky, p.10B; Luther Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South, 1930-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Ancestry.com, *1930 U.S. Federal Census*, "Ella M. and Lewis H. Brown," Cleveland, Cuyahoga, Ohio, p. 14A.

in place that dictated racial hierarchy, and thus, whites were slower to implement residential segregation, but it did develop after the turn of the century. The changes in Bootheel towns between 1900 and 1910, however, were noticeable. In 1900, for example, African Americans still lived throughout much of New Madrid, but the construction of O'Bannon school in the northeast part of town signaled the emergence of a new geographical pattern. Figure 12 shows where African Americans lived in 1900. The solid lines indicate streets with Black independent households, and the broken lines indicate streets where African Americans lived in white households as servants.²³⁵ The square on the map in the northeast quadrant indicates where O'Bannon School was built in 1900. Figure 13 shows the changes that had taken place by 1910. The map shows that while African Americans still lived in different parts of town, the northeast corner had become the locus of Black residential and institutional growth.

Determining where African Americans churches and schools were built was probably part of whites' process of implementing racialized town planning. For example, the new O'Bannon School and new Beebe Chapel A.M.E. church were built in the northeast part of town, where few African Americans lived, according to the 1900 census. Rev. L. H. Brown, pastor the Beebe Chapel in 1900, and his wife Ella lived in the church parsonage on Riley Street, which indicates that the earlier church building was already distant from the oldest part of town. On the Sanborn maps, Riley Street is labeled Texas Street. It is the same street that parallels the St. Louis Southwestern Railroad, and is on the southern edge of what would become the predominately Black neighborhood. Black schools, and many Black churches, were dependent

²³⁵ The map is from 1911, because there was not a 1900 Sanborn map that encompassed the town in its entirety, but the data is from the 1900 U.S. Census.

on loans and gifts from whites for their construction, so this was one way whites could control the location of Black residential growth.²³⁶

Racial zoning through property ownership and rent control were the primary ways segregated Black neighborhoods developed in Bootheel towns. It was a process similar to what took place in larger cities, although in towns African Americans were pushed to the outer edges of towns, rather than hemmed into city centers. By 1910 in New Madrid the Black population had expanded into the northeast part of town, and quite a few families owned homes. The green dots indicate streets on which African Americans owned homes (thus, one dot represents one or more homeowners). African Americans still rented and owned homes in other parts of the city, but over time most moved into the new neighborhood, which became the center of Black life in the town.

Growing white opposition to a Black institutional presence in downtowns informed this process. The thinking by whites regarding African Americans and town space is illustrated by examples from Sikeston, in Scott County and Hayti, in Pemiscot County. The development of these two towns differed temporally from New Madrid and Charleston, in that they were not incorporated until after the Civil War, and Black population growth occurred later there than in older towns. When these populations began to increase, however, conflict over public space intensified.²³⁷

In 1920, there were only about 100 Black residents in Sikeston. Regardless of the small number, the editor of the *Sikeston Standard*, Charles L. Blanton, grew anxious about African

²³⁶ Ancestry.com, *1900 U.S. Federal Census*, "Rev. L. H. and Ella Brown," New Madrid, New Madrid, MO, p. 13A.

²³⁷ Pemiscot County Place Names, http://shs.umsystem.edu/manuscripts/ramsay/ramsay_pemiscot.html; City of Sikeston, "Sikeston, Missouri," http://www.sikeston.org/history_of_sikeston.php; In 1900 there were only thirty-four African Americans living in Sikeston, and a decade later that number had only increased to seventy-one.

Americans' use of downtown space. He perceived that "Negroes are flocking into the town in droves...they have been using the City Hall as a Church House, which is displeasing many citizens."²³⁸ Other editorials expressed disapproval of a Black-owned restaurant behind the Malone Theater. In June 1919, someone wrote in the *Sikeston Standard*, sarcastically, or perhaps hopefully, that "it would be a burning shame if some of the racing autos that pass down New Madrid Street by the Marshall Hotel, should jerk about 100 paving bricks out of the street and throw them through the negro restaurant at the rear end of the Malone Theater."²³⁹

White residents of Sikeston did not necessarily want to exclude all African Americans from the downtown area, for they frequented white businesses and worked in the wealthy homes adjacent to downtown. They did oppose the regular gathering of large numbers of African Americans, such as the church congregation, in what they deemed white public spaces. They especially opposed the establishment of Black businesses, such as the restaurant, that were Black social gathering spaces. Similar sentiments were expressed in Hayti, where a newspaper editorial complained about a Black-owned beer garden downtown. The author declared it a public nuisance to white people because they were forced to hear "insulting remarks made by negroes to negroes" as they walked by, and because whites were "forced to walk in the street because negroes crowded the sidewalk in the front of the building."²⁴⁰

In both Sikeston and Hayti, the editors referred to the concept of the "negro town." In Sikeston, the editor declared "The question before the people of Sikeston at this time is 'Do we wish to be a negro town?'"²⁴¹ In Hayti, the editor asserted that "Hayti is not a negro town. It has

²³⁸ Editorial, *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, June 13, 1919.

²³⁹ Editorial, *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, June 24, 1919.

²⁴⁰ "The Negro "Beer Garden" Situation," *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), July 21, 1933.

²⁴¹ Editorial, *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, June 13, 1919.

no segregated negro section. The block in which the beer garden is located is not negro territory. Therefore, negroes have no right to congest any part of the town to the extent of forcing white people around them or maintaining a place of amusement which is a nuisance to white residents in the immediate locality.” The editor called for the police and city officials to take action, “else the public, itself may take drastic measures.”²⁴²

The sentiments expressed by whites in Hayti and Sikeston reveal that there was a population threshold past which a “negro section” had to exist, if there was going to be any kind of sizable gathering of African Americans, whether for church or leisure. They had to have a separate “territory.” The fact that whites saw this as a choice in Hayti and Sikeston – whether or not to be a “negro town” – reveals one of the Border South characteristics of the Bootheel: a mix of towns with substantial Black populations, and some with small Black populations or none at all. African Americans had lived in New Madrid and Charleston before the Civil War. Because the elite relied on African American workers, it is unlikely they considered expelling African Americans; but certainly as the Black populations grew, they saw segregated parts of town as a solution to conflicts over downtown public space. Because it was more difficult to implement this segregation, given that African Americans already lived and owned property near downtown, white violence, such as lynchings, were one way to attempt to impose a racial order and control Black behavior.

Although African Americans were increasingly excluded from living and socializing in certain parts of town, African Americans and the white working class shared some neighborhoods. In New Madrid, for example, whites and Blacks lived and owned houses in the northeast part of town in the early twentieth century, although it became a predominately Black

²⁴² “The Negro “Beer Garden” Situation,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), July 21, 1933.

neighborhood over time. L. H. Brown, who grew up in New Madrid, recalled that “poor people were poor people during those times. There was a line of demarcation between those who had and those who had not.” Residential segregation existed, “except if you were white and poor and black it didn’t matter.” For whites, class was one determinant of residential location. African Americans who had more wealth than most, however, could not choose to live in a wealthier part of town with whites. What distinguished their status was not neighborhood, but rather “a better house and you had more of the amenities of life.”

This pattern illustrates the stark power imbalance of racial apartheid in a white supremacist society. Whites always maintained the privilege of entering Black institutions and living in neighborhoods they chose (although constrained by income), but African Americans did not have the same rights. Today, one might look at persistent racially segregated residential patterns in towns and assume that it is a result of “self-segregation,” or a “natural” result of private market forces or individual white prejudice. As sociologists and historians have clearly demonstrated, however, such patterns were deliberately created through restrictive covenants, real estate firms, discriminatory lending, threats of violence, police enforcement, and other forms of control that had the backing of the government at all levels. Spatial patterns of racial separation are not “natural,” but instead are rooted in structural power imbalances imposed and maintained by whites.

The strategies whites used to implement racial apartheid were employed in the North and South in the twentieth century. Scholars have critiqued the popular notion that there was a strict dichotomy of “*de jure*” segregation in the South and “*de facto*” segregation in the North. Certainly, *de jure* segregation, backed by law, was pervasive throughout the South in the form of Jim Crow laws. The power of law, especially at the state level, should not be dismissed. The

term *de facto*, or segregation “in fact,” on the other hand, obscures the fact that segregation was created by government and private policies, often operating in conjunction, that in many cases were just as effective as laws. Moreover, white southerners did not rely solely on legal apparatuses to implement racial apartheid, but rather employed discriminatory lending, violence, and proxies for explicitly racial zoning ordinances, such as restrictive covenants.²⁴³

Some southern cities, especially border cities where African Americans moved in large numbers in the early twentieth century, passed racial segregation ordinances between 1913 and 1916. Large cities, such as St. Louis, Missouri, Louisville, Kentucky, and Baltimore, Maryland have garnered the most scholarly attention on this issue, but small towns and cities passed ordinances as well.²⁴⁴ Charleston, in the Bootheel, “overwhelmingly” passed a residential segregation ordinance. Prior to that, residents had pushed for restrictive covenants to control racial residential patterns.²⁴⁵ These ordinances were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Buchanan v. Warley*, in 1917, as a result of the NAACP’s legal challenge of the Louisville law. Like northern cities, however, southern cities found other ways to spatially segregate African Americans.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ Matthew D. Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth,” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, eds. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25-48.

²⁴⁴ George C. Wright, “The NAACP and Residential Segregation in Louisville, Kentucky, 1914-1917,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 78, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 39-54; Gretchen Boger, “The Meaning of Neighborhood in the Modern City: Baltimore’s Residential Segregation Ordinances, 1910-1913,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 2 (January 2009): 236-58; Frances L. Edwards and Grayson Bennett Thomason, “The Legal Creation of Raced Space: The Subtle and Ongoing Discrimination Created through Jim Crow Laws,” *Berkeley Journal of African American Law and Policy* 12, no. 1 (January 2010): 145-46; Smaller cities included Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Pendleton and Greenville, South Carolina.

²⁴⁵ *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, ed. Robert A. Hill, vol. 5, September 1922--August 1924 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 663, 668, n9.

²⁴⁶ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 187-188;

Even as whites tried to control where African Americans lived within towns, as historian Earl Lewis has argued, African American history cannot be reduced to a narrative of oppression and segregation, because individuals and families sought autonomy, and created congregation, within spatial and economic confines. “Congregation was important because it symbolized an act of free will, whereas segregation represented the imposition of another’s will.”²⁴⁷ In New Madrid, regardless of the power dynamics that undoubtedly underlay the geographical location of the O’Bannon school, and the nearby Beebe Chapel C.M.E. Church, the community took great pride in the construction of the substantial brick structures, not only as symbols of progress, but also for what they meant materially for the health and well-being of the community.

The spatial development of Black neighborhoods in other river county towns followed patterns similar to New Madrid. Figure 14 shows that by 1910, African Americans in Charleston primarily lived in the southwest corner of town, as indicated by the red lines in this map.²⁴⁸ In Caruthersville, as Figures 15 and 16 reveal, by 1920, most African Americans lived in the Third Ward, in the southeastern part of town, indicated by the lines on the map. Although the Sanborn Map Company left much of this southeast part of town blank, census manuscripts indicate this neighborhood was well-developed in 1920. There were six Black ministers, a teacher, a doctor, fifty homeowners, a pool hall, restaurant, soda fountain, tailor shop, butcher shop, and jewelry shop. This 1920 census data is more fully reflected by using a portion of the 1928 Sanborn Map. The small squares mark the location of the Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church, the A.M.E. Church, two Baptist churches, and Washington School. As elsewhere, African Americans in

²⁴⁷ Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 89-92.

²⁴⁸ The length of the lines do not reflect any numerical value in terms of number of households. The census did not record house numbers, so if one family lived on a street, I have marked its entire length with blue or red.

Caruthersville lived in other parts of town, but about two-thirds lived in Ward Three in the southeast portion.

The Resurgence of Mob Violence in Charleston and Caruthersville, 1910-1911

After the near-lynching of Louis Hicks, in 1906, there was a four-year break in mob violence in Bootheel towns. As Black communities continued to expand, African Americans in the Bootheel and across the state experienced important victories in the battle against white supremacy. In 1906, as Chapter One describes, seven white men, including two members of the prominent Smith family from New Madrid and Scott Counties, were convicted of peonage after they recruited over forty Black workers from Memphis under false pretenses and forced them to work under armed guard. Even more unusual, the men actually served time in the federal penitentiary. The case received widespread attention in the press, and the implications of the case reverberated across the Bootheel, serving as a warning to white landowners that they would be held accountable for such practices.

. In February 1907, the specter of separate rail cars again reared its head when the Missouri State Senate passed a law that would segregate railways. In response, fifty Black leaders from different churches and organizations met at the A.M.E. church in Jefferson City and then met with Governor Joseph W. Folk and the railroad committee in the House of Representatives to protest the legislation. As a result of their actions, the House did not pass the bill. This was a significant victory, for it meant Missouri was the only former slave state to be free of such legislation. In 1908, at the Democratic state convention, Kansas City mayor Tom Crittenden proposed a resolution to disfranchise African Americans because he wanted to “declare for white

man's government." The ensuing debates were "riotous" and resulted in a broken gavel. The session concluded with a decided defeat of the resolution but also a decision to revisit the issue in the fall. Former governor Alexander M. Dockery reminded those present that "It may have been a political crime to enfranchise 4,000,000 blacks, but we must not forget that we Democrats, now and then, vote these blacks."²⁴⁹ Democrats, despite their general opposition to Black voting, found it useful when it worked in their favor.

The division among white Democrats regarding African Americans and politics was present at the local level in New Madrid. In the 1908 state Democratic convention, Jim (J. V.) Conran supported the right of African Americans to vote. His support, however, was connected to the fact that he represented "a section of the state where the Negro vote is as largely cast for the Democratic as for the Republican ticket." In fact, the number of Black votes for Democrats at this time in the Bootheel was not large, but Conran and other elite whites did have significant power over votes in the county, enough that the popular conception statewide was that he ran a political machine.²⁵⁰ Robert Shelby Rutledge of New Madrid, a prosecuting attorney who sought the state Democratic Party's nomination as candidate to the U.S. Senate in 1910, held a different position. He withdrew from the race because he was "so opposed to the negro plank in the Democratic State platform." His position was that "the burden of government should be borne by the white man."²⁵¹

By the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans in towns like New Madrid, Charleston, and Caruthersville comprised enough of the population that they could swing the

²⁴⁹ "Afro-American Conclave," *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 27, 1907.

²⁵⁰ Sarvis, *J. V. Conran*, 1-11. Sarvis argues Conran was not a political boss, but he did wield considerable political power.

²⁵¹ "Quits Senatorial Race Because of Negro Plank," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 25, 1910.

results of an election in a particular direction. In 1908, as the temperance movement swept over Missouri, counties and towns could choose whether to go wet or dry. Pemiscot County went dry, but Caruthersville remained wet by a wide margin “thanks to the negro vote.”²⁵² Larry Grothaus, in his dissertation on race in Missouri politics, argues that “Racial violence...was not closely associated with efforts to segregate and disfranchise the Negro in Missouri.” He notes that during the peak of political attacks on African Americans, from 1904 to 1908, there were only four lynchings in Missouri (in Springfield and Belmont, Mississippi County).²⁵³ While Black political power may not have been the primary cause of lynchings, Black voting and political activism, especially that which was mobilized against Jim Crow laws, posed a threat to white supremacy more broadly. On a local level, it was certainly part of a larger matrix of Black self-assertion that angered whites.

In 1910 and 1911, mob violence reappeared in the Bootheel when white mobs lynched four African Americans and nearly lynched two more in Charleston and New Madrid. Like previous lynchings, three of the murders were carried out in reaction to attacks on well-known white men. Two of the averted lynchings were in response to alleged attacks on white women. There is little information on the lynching that took place in New Madrid on May 29, 1910. The victim was not identified, and in fact someone pinned a note on him that labeled him as “unknown.”²⁵⁴ According to the local newspaper, “a crowd of negroes blocked the sidewalk in front of Sheehy’s [saloon], on Main Street.” Town Marshal L. A. Richards, “in accordance with his duty and custom, asked them to step aside and permit persons to pass.” Everyone did so,

²⁵² “River Trade in Pemiscot,” *Kansas City (MO) Star*, October 2, 1908.

²⁵³ Larry Henry Grothaus, “The Negro in Missouri Politics, 1890-1941,” (PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1970), 46.

²⁵⁴ “Vengeance of the Mob on a Missouri Negro,” *Asheville (NC) Gazette-News*, May 31, 1910; “Mob Stormed Jail and Lynched Negro,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 1, 1910.

except “a strange negro.” Richards again asked the man to move and was “treated contemptuously.” Richards tried to push the man aside, which led to a struggle and the unidentified African American “tried to take something from his pocket.” The fight garnered a lot of public attention. That night, a group of men took him from the jail and hung him “in the west end of town,” possibly the same area where Louis F. Wright was lynched in 1902.²⁵⁵

The *Chicago Daily Tribune*, in its annual listing of lynchings, recorded that the unidentified African American was lynched because of “murderous assault,” but news reports do not confirm that murder was his intent.²⁵⁶ Regardless, an assault on a white officer of the law was perceived as a direct attack on white authority more generally, and by refusing to move off the sidewalk in order to let people (presumably white residents) pass, he violated racial etiquette. The fact that he was labeled as “unknown” and called a “strange young negro” in the local newspaper, reflected the unease of the white elite with the number of African Americans who were moving to town and moving through the area seasonally to work in the field and rural industry. As historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage found in his study of lynching in Virginia and Georgia, “any blacks who led a nomadic life as laborers in a rural industry – railroad workers, miners, lumber and turpentine hands, for example – kindled hostility even without committing any crime.”²⁵⁷ In fact, the local newspaper reported rumors that he was from Arkansas and had been working near the river at Point Pleasant, that he “had cut a man, some where, and was considered a very dangerous character.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ “Last Lynching in New Madrid Was Back in 1910,” *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), March 18, 1966.

²⁵⁶ “Record of the Life Tragedies of the Year: Suicides in 1910,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 31, 1910.

²⁵⁷ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 80-81.

²⁵⁸ “Last Lynching in New Madrid Was Back in 1910,” *The Weekly Record* (New Madrid, MO), March 18, 1966.

While the white elite was instrumental in recruiting Black labor to work in rural industry in town, and on their farms in the countryside, they were also anxious about their ability to control African Americans who were new to town, and with whom they had no relationships or prior knowledge. The absence of established ties meant less control over Black actions. It was not uncommon for whites to pin notes on lynching victims in order to deliver specific warnings to African Americans who viewed the body. In this case, the note may have warned local African Americans, or those who were passing through town, that they needed to maintain ties to the white elite, and show deference, in order to ensure their safety. On the other hand, if the mob was composed largely of white workers it may have signaled anger at the recruitment of Black workers from other southern states to work in rural industry.

An important dimension of this lynching, tied to fears of Black transience and criminality, was the battle over public space. When the author of the local news article speculated about the alleged dangerous character of the lynching victim, he or she attempted to justify the murder of a man who resisted Marshal Richards' attempt to control his access to the public space of the sidewalk. We will never know exactly what prompted the man to fight Marshal Richards, , but given the long history of white law enforcement policing African Americans' collective gatherings, and controlling Black mobility, this may have been a breaking point for someone who had endured a lifetime of such experiences. As historian Jane Dailey notes, "The appropriation of public space was an important way for African Americans in this period to assert their humanity, demonstrate their political rights, and stake their claim to equal citizenship." While she is specifically addressing the 1880s, just before the hardening of Jim Crow, other scholars such as Robin D. G. Kelley have argued that public spaces were important sites of Black resistance during Jim Crow. Whites were concerned with an erosion of Black

deference in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While Dailey frames certain acts of resistance as covert, or as part of a hidden transcript of resistance, in Charleston, the African American who refused to move off a sidewalk and argued with the town Marshal was engaging in an overt act of rebellion.²⁵⁹

In the Bootheel, it was in the early decades of the twentieth century that whites attempted to solidify Jim Crow on a local and state level. As the previously discussed examples of outrage over African Americans' use of downtown space in Hayti and Sikeston reveal, this was a period of spatial contestation in Bootheel towns. Places like New Madrid, where African Americans had lived for generations, had enforced well-established customs of segregation and racial deference. African Americans lived and worked throughout town, but as in the case of the saloon where Louis Hicks and Edward Waters socialized, businesses were often spatially segregated, or segregated by dictates of behavior, such as entering and leaving through the back door. As the Black population increased, however, along with associated group gatherings of African Americans in downtowns, or on main public thoroughfares, whites perceived a threat to tradition. In towns like Sikeston and Hayti, which had very few Black residents and were not deemed "negro towns," the establishment of any Black institutions, but particularly those in downtown, was perceived as a threat.

A little over a month after the unidentified African American was lynched in New Madrid, Robert Coleman, from Henderson, Kentucky, and Sam Fields from Memphis, were lynched in Charleston, Missouri, by a mob of whites. Fields and Coleman allegedly killed planter William Fox on July 2, 1910. Reports of the exact location and sequence of the attack

²⁵⁹ Jane Dailey, "Deference and Violence in the Postbellum Urban South: Manners and Massacres in Danville, Virginia," *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 3 (August 1997):553-58; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 55-75.

vary slightly, but Coleman and Fields apparently hitched a ride with Fox, because they worked as field hands on a farm near his home, a couple of miles from Charleston. They allegedly shot Fox along the way, and stole seven dollars. They were captured and placed in the Charleston jail. Some reports indicate Fox identified them before he died. Another report says Fox died, but three white field hands heard them discuss the murder. Word spread overnight about the murder, and “farmers from the country began flocking into Charleston.” Sheriff Culp called Governor Hadley for assistance and deputized some men, but the deputies were “powerless to check the mob” even though it took a full two hours for the mob to break into the jail.²⁶⁰

Prosecuting Attorney J. Moore Haw tried to dissuade the mob, “but the crowd was determined on a lynching.” No shots were fired on either side because “in the crowd which packed the Courthouse yard in front of the jail were many women and children, and the officers feared on that account to resort to extreme measures....” The size of the mob was undoubtedly increased by the fact that church let out as the mob started to gather near the jail. Reports on the size of the mob range from 350 to 5,000, but given that the population of Charleston was just over 3,000, the report of 350 or 1,000 seems more realistic. Robert Coleman was lynched near the courthouse, but Sam Fields allegedly offered to show them where he hid the revolver used to kill Fox. He changed his mind, and the mob hung him from a railroad signal board, where the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railroad intersected Airline Road. His body was deliberately left to hang for several hours in view of passengers on evening trains, but it was also “the part of the town occupied by negroes.” There were two branches of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad. One transected the northwest part of town, and the other, the southwest,

²⁶⁰ “Negroes Lynched by Mob Near Cairo,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1910.

where African Americans lived. Because Airline Road extended south of town, it was in this southwest quadrant of the city where Fields was killed.²⁶¹

The fact that Fields was taken to the Black neighborhood clearly indicates whites' intention to intimidate local Black residents. In fact, one newspaper reported that after Sam Fields was lynched near the Black neighborhood, "the mob was bent on burning the negro section of Charleston but cooler heads prevailed."²⁶² The *Charleston Courier* denied that any Charleston residents were part of the mob, suggesting that although "some may have acted with it, ninety-five percent were only spectators." Given that Fox was a farmer who lived several miles outside the city, it is possible that other farmers instigated the lynching. However, the fact that there was talk of burning the Black community suggests a local antipathy. The editor of the *Courier* denounced mob violence but reassured readers that "if it is found desirable to remove the negroes from Charleston, or any part of it, it can be accomplished better and at less cost of money, and blood, by other and more peaceable means. The *Courier* has no particular love for mixed population, but the negro is here, and as long as he behaves himself, we are in favor of allowing him to remain." The method by which this would be carried out was through property control. The editor informed readers "it will be easy to buy out the few who own property, and to get owners to move those who are tenants, which will practically mean all." Another option would be to pass a vagrancy ordinance in order to get rid of "loafers, white and black."²⁶³

Two days later, whites nearly lynched Lee Gardner, who allegedly entered the room of Geneva Drinkwater, the daughter of a well-known planter who lived a few miles north of

²⁶¹ In "Negroes Lynched by Mob near Cairo," the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1910, reported that he was hanged from the yard arm where two branches of the Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad crossed.

²⁶² "Negroes Lynched by Mob near Cairo," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1910.

²⁶³ "Double Lynching Follows Murder," *Charleston (MO) Courier*, July 8, 1910.

Charleston. Deputy Sheriff Ezekiel Bailey of Charleston took Gardner to St. Louis in order to prevent a lynching. He reported that “mobs were encountered at almost every station on the Iron Mountain railroad.”²⁶⁴ They were “chased for 50 miles of their 200 mile trip by two different mobs of armed men and only escaped by a few minutes, having made the first lap of the journey in an automobile.”

The close call for Lee Gardner occurred on July 5, the day after Black boxer Jack Johnson defeated James J. Jeffries for the title of Heavyweight Champion. The buildup to the fight had been intense, and Jeffries was deemed “the Great White Hope” during a period when whites feared the decline of the white race. Physical superiority was a sign of racial superiority, and it was seen by whites as a critical part of their defense of the purity of white womanhood against miscegenation and the sexual predations of Black men. When Jeffries lost, and African Americans celebrated Johnson’s victory as a light in the darkness of systemic racial oppression and daily indignities, whites rioted in anger, unable to accept the outcome.²⁶⁵ It was in this context of national tension and violence that Lee Gardner was accused of attempting to sexually assault a white girl and nearly lynched. One news article suggests that there may have been another near lynching on July 4 when a Black man was “captured by a crowd of citizens after had used rough language in addressing a white woman.” His captors decided the insult was not enough for another lynching and let him go. White racial hysteria was at a fever pitch.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and Governor Herbert Hadley condemned the lynchings of Robert Coleman and Sam Fields. Hadley offered a \$500 reward for information about the

²⁶⁴ “Prevent Missouri Mob from Lynching Negro” *Los Angeles Herald*, July 6, 1910; “Two Mobs Organized in Missouri,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 6, 1910.

²⁶⁵ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1-5; Thomas R. Hietala, *Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 13-47.

perpetrators, and ordered the county prosecuting attorney to conduct an investigation and convene a special grand jury. The local coroner's jury had already returned the usual verdict of death "at the hands of parties unknown." In an unusual twist, the grand jury did indict six people for the lynchings, but none appear to have been convicted. The grand jury also returned an indictment of Lee Gardner for the attempted assault on Geneva Drinkwater.²⁶⁶

Although Governor Hadley condemned the lynchings, he suggested that African Americans "should be particularly careful to give no occasion for offense," including celebrating the Johnson victory, and that the fight's "only significance is that a negro prize-fighter whipped a worn-out prize fighter, who had impaired his constitution by idleness and dissipation." An African American from St. Louis anonymously responded to Hadley's directive, criticizing him for addressing "negro citizens as a whole," and calling out his hypocrisy in treating African Americans differently from "thousands of our best white citizens, who read with avidity every scrap of news obtainable before and after the battle."²⁶⁷

Many African Americans in Charleston and the surrounding area, realizing that they were in danger whether they gave offense to whites or not, chose to leave town. It is possible there were other forms of resistance, such as local mass meetings, smaller gatherings in churches and fraternal organizations, and plans for armed self-defense, but if so, they were not reported in the press. The population of Charleston, between 1910 and 1920, decreased from 719 to 520. Much of this decline was due to migration north during World War I, but violence also played a role.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ "The Lynching Spirit," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 5, 1910; "Hadley Warns Negroes Not to Offend Whites," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 7, 1910; "Grand Jury Finds Mob Indictments," *Charleston (MO) Courier*, July 15, 1910.

²⁶⁷ "Hadley Warns Negroes Not to Offend Whites," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 7, 1910; Letter to the Editor, "Gov. Hadley and the Negro," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 9, 1910.

²⁶⁸ Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Charleston, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, *1920 U. S. Census*, Charleston, Mississippi, MO.

A year later, the violence continued, this time in Caruthersville. On October 11, 1911, a mob of “50 men and youths,” including some of the “best citizens,” lynched A. B. Richardson, who was in jail either for vagrancy or petty theft. The main target in the jail was apparently Ben “High Pockets” Woods, who had allegedly “followed” two white girls and “accosted” one of them.²⁶⁹ One article indicated the lynching was “the culmination of a series of crimes” that also included the stabbing of two white men.²⁷⁰ The mob initially planned to take Woods, but Richardson made an “insolent remark,” so they took him, too.²⁷¹ Reports indicated that both Richardson and Woods were beaten at a baseball park and Richardson was thrown into the river, but Richardson’s death certificate, filed under A. B. Rich, indicates he was hanged. Ben “High Pockets” Woods was allegedly let go. This seems unlikely, but his body was never found. The mob then burned a Black boarding house that was “the rendezvous of negro gamblers.”²⁷²

Historian Irvin Wyllie argues that accusations of Black crime were a guise for economic motivations for the lynchings and the burning of the boarding house. It was cotton-picking season, and whites resented Black competition for jobs. However, the report that some of the “best citizens” were involved suggests that it was not solely about economic competition between workers. One article indicated there had been “a dispute between the planters and the negroes over wages.” Moreover, apart from Richardson’s alleged insolence to the mob, two weeks earlier there had been a conflict over sidewalk space between an African American and

²⁶⁹ “Caurthersville Lynchers Safe from Prosecution,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 12, 1911.

²⁷⁰ “Mob Storms Jail, Lynches 2 Negroes in Missouri Town,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 11, 1911.

²⁷¹ “Caurthersville Lynchers Safe from Prosecution,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 12, 1911.

²⁷² A. B. Rich, death certificate 35438, Missouri Death Certificates, 1910-1964, <https://sl.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/deathcertificates/Default.aspx#searchDB>; “Caruthersville Lynchers Safe from Prosecution,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 12, 1911.

two white barbers. The Black man was beaten by the barbers, but he defended himself and stabbed one of them.²⁷³

It is not clear where the boarding house burned was located, but A. B. Richardson, who was 25 years old in 1910, worked as a saloon porter and his wife Della, age 21, was a boarding house cook. They had only been married three years and had moved from Tennessee. They lived on Eastwood Avenue, which started near the riverfront in the older part of town. Della Richardson remained in Caruthersville and remarried the following year.²⁷⁴

Black Resistance and Community Development

In subsequent years, Black institutions and organizations in Caruthersville continued to grow, and African Americans battled white violence and oppression through public statements in a local Black newspaper, through voting, and the formation of an NAACP chapter. Unlike in New Madrid and Charleston, which experienced a population decline between 1910 and 1920, the Black population in Caruthersville and Pemiscot County increased. This growth was the early trickle of a large migration from the Deep South in 1922-1923.

In 1920, a group of predominately working-class men organized a chapter of the NAACP in Caruthersville. The leader of this early attempt was Rev. E. (Ephraim) A. McKinney, a longtime resident of the region. Born in North Carolina, McKinney was 72 years old and had lived in Missouri since at least 1880, making a living as both a minister and laborer. He asked

²⁷³ “Caruthersville Lynchers Safe from Prosecution,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 12, 1911.

²⁷⁴ Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, “Della and A. B. Richardson,” Caruthersville, Pemiscot, MO, p. 7A; Ancestry.com, Della Richardson and Percy Jackson, *Missouri Marriage Records, 1805-2002*, August 16, 1912, Caruthersville, Pemiscot, MO.

the NAACP for six or more copies of the *Crisis*, because “I want to get our people in the habit of reading it.” His letter suggested there was an earlier attempt to organize a chapter, and he was convinced that “if I can get this order of NAACP revived again I think it will be of a great benefit to our people.”²⁷⁵

Correspondence from the chapter members revealed their major concerns, and their hopes that the NAACP could assist with their struggles. The primary issues they faced in 1920-1921 were voter intimidation by county officials, the sexual exploitation of Black women by white men, and injustices in the legal system. African Americans never lost the right to vote in Missouri, but they faced intimidation in Caruthersville and Pemiscot County when their electoral power grew as a result of migration between 1910 and 1920. This led to backlash from white Democrats, because African Americans voted Republican.

The threats to Black voters came from the white working class and county officials. In August 1921, Major Will Morgan sent the national NAACP office part of one of the local white Caruthersville newspapers, “so you will know what shape we are in and to let you know what class of white people we have in this town.”²⁷⁶ The editor of the *Pemiscot Argus* was S. E. Juden, who had been county sheriff from 1917 to 1921.²⁷⁷ According to Morgan, at fall elections in 1920, Juden’s deputy sheriff, Henry Morgan, told African Americans to stay away from the polls. One man was taken out of town by a white mob of six or eight men, which included the

²⁷⁵ Ancestry.com, 1920 *U. S. Federal Census*, “E. A. McKinney,” Little Prairie, Pemiscot, MO, p. 6A; E. A. McKinney to the NAACP, December 21, 1920, f. 6, box 1-G107, Part I – Branch Files, 1910-1947, NAACP Records, LOC.

²⁷⁶ Major Will Morgan to the NAACP, August 9, 1921, f. 6, box 1-G107, Part I – Branch Files, 1910-1947, NAACP Papers, LOC.

²⁷⁷ “Simeon Edward Juden,” *The Republican* (Caruthersville, MO), February 17, 1938, Find-A-Grave database, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=41684214>.

deputy sheriff, and beaten. He fled to Arkansas, but had recently returned, and Will Morgan wanted advice from the NAACP on what to do about the issue. His letter also expressed concern about the fact that some African American women “lay out in rail road in Barns and on the Road Side with white men Walk on the street with them and if We colored men say anything to them the White man will tell us that he will take his gun and blow are branes out.” Morgan said he and others went to the police, but they wanted the NAACP to provide suggestions for how to fight the ongoing exploitation of Black women.

Morgan’s letter conveys the struggles African Americans faced in small towns throughout the South. Even though African Americans in Caruthersville could legally vote, intimidation and violence threatened the effectiveness of this form of collective power. They were more vulnerable to violence in rural areas and small towns, and McKinney and Morgan’s efforts to establish an NAACP chapter reflected an attempt to connect to larger organizations with some modicum of power. Unfortunately, the national NAACP was not helpful, for it said Morgan had done the right thing by going to the police, even though law enforcement was complicit in the violence and exploitation of African Americans.

The next suggestion the NAACP made was for Morgan and others to “do all in your power to interest the ministers and social agencies such as fraternal orders, etc. in creating sentiment which will cause the colored people of the community to condemn so strongly such actions as those stated in your letter as to deter them in some degree.” Their advice, then, was to rely on moral suasion and respectability politics in order to condemn the behavior of white men and Black women.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Director of Branches, NAACP to Will Morgan, August 23, 1921, f. 6, box 1-G107, Part I – Branch Files, 1910-1947, NAACP Records, LOC.

Although it is not clear if Morgan and others followed this advice on this specific issue, African Americans in Caruthersville were already using the Black and white press to both appeal to whites and convey a message of Black uplift by advocating certain behaviors. The fact that a group of predominately working-class men and women formed the NAACP chapter suggests that they were looking for new solutions in their struggle against injustice, and this may have reflected a class-divide among African Americans in Caruthersville. Most of the NAACP members were common laborers. Table 4 shows the occupations of sixty-four persons who applied for an NAACP charter in Caruthersville.

Table 4. Occupation of Caruthersville NAACP Charter Applicants – 1921

Occupation	Number Persons in Occupation
Common Labor	46
Farming	8
Barber	3
Train Porter	1
Fireman	1
Minister	1
Chauffeur	1
Housewife	1
Truck Driver (sawmill)	1
Cook	1
Total	64

Source: Application for Charter of Caruthersville, Mo. Branch of the NAACP, f. 6, box 1-G107, Part I – Branch Files, 1910-1947, NAACP Records, LOC.

In contrast, Rev. J. W. D. Mayes was a voice for the small Black middle class in Caruthersville. In 1912, he started publishing *The Anchor*, “the only Negro paper between St. Louis and Memphis.” It was a family business, with his daughter Alice as associate editor and his son W. S. Mayes as the business and general manger. Unfortunately, only one issue from July 30, 1921 has survived, but it provides a window into a socially and politically vibrant, race-conscious Black community.²⁷⁹ *The Anchor*, through its editorial comments, revealed a middle-class philosophy of race pride that was both conscious and critical of local white representations of African Americans. Although editorial comments are too general to discern particular points of contention, they reveal the existence of divisions among African Americans by asking “why we cannot get our group together in this city? So we may better understand each other, and the other race may see us in a different light?” The paper saw itself as an instrument of uplift, and a positive reflection of Black life in a virulently racist environment. “EVERY PENNY U Put into The Anchor U Help to Maintain and Support a Paper Which gives attention to the Progressive and Social Side of the RACE, rather Than Tell Who Got Fined, Sent to the Pen, or some other LOW DEGRADED Thing Give us your support and we will fight for Everything That GO TO Lift the RACE Up to greater things.”

Earlier that year, William Brooks, principal of the Washington School, gave a report on the Colored Teachers Association in the white newspaper, the *Twice-a-Week Democrat*. He asked “our white citizens to come and give us an encouraging work in our efforts to do good,” and noted that “We are trying as best we can to bring about a more general improvement among our people, to the effect that they may become more useful, self-respecting, self-sustaining, acceptable citizens in our progressive city.” Specifically, he noted that the type of race leadership

²⁷⁹ J. W. D. Mayes, *The Anchor* (Caruthersville, MO), July 30, 1921.

they needed was exemplified by Rev. B. T. Brevard, J. W. D. Mayes, J. R. McClain, J. B. Bell, J. W. Safford and Lewis Caruthers. Only one of these men, J. R. McClain, may have been an NAACP member.²⁸⁰

The issue of how African Americans were represented in the white press was of major concern to Rev. Mayes and other Black citizens. And while Mayes called for Black unity in order to fight negative images, he also directly criticized white newspapers, a bold action given the dangerous conditions African Americans faced in the region. There must have been something particularly upsetting published in July 1921, for the paper directly criticized the *Sikeston Standard* for taking a “whack” at African Americans, and calling it and other papers “Yello streaked journals” that are “forever stricking [sic] at the Negro.”²⁸¹

The local white Caruthersville papers were some of the worst offenders in this regard and contained some of the most vitriolic racist commentary. Earlier in the year, the *Twice-A-Week Democrat* reprinted an editorial from the *Missouri State Journal* that was critical of the election of African American Walthall M. Moore to the Missouri House of Representatives. Local commentary, added to the reprint of this article, called the election of this “buck nigger” “nauseating” and “the most disgraceful things that has ever happened in the political life of the state.” But what irritated the commentator even more was that that Moore was a “sleek, highly cultured, “splendid citizenship” type which “we have only recently learned about,” rather than the typical “‘cotton-field or ‘dog-fennel’ negro that we people of the south are used to seeing and whom we can tolerate and have to an extent a fellow-feeling for by reason of our association with them.” These disparaging comments about Moore revealed the antagonism whites felt

²⁸⁰ “Colored Teachers Association,” *Twice-A-Week Democrat* (Caruthersville, MO), February 22, 1921.

²⁸¹ J. W. D. Mayes, *The Anchor* (Caruthersville, MO), July 30, 1921.

towards African Americans who they believed were getting out of their place, by being educated, politically active, and asserting their citizenship rights.²⁸²

Although *The Anchor* appears to have predominately represented a middle-class perspective, like other Black newspapers, it provided a critical counterpoint to white supremacy by allowing African Americans to speak for and represent themselves. Through its critique of white stereotypes, reporting on Republican politics, and as an avenue of communication about social activities in Caruthersville and the surrounding area, it fostered community development. The fact that it survived at least nine years suggests that there was a fair-sized readership, which may have included residents of other Bootheel towns, and towns in adjacent states like Blytheville, Arkansas.

The formation of the Caruthersville NAACP, another protest strategy, was not sustained past 1922. The racial climate for the NAACP was overtly hostile, and the national NAACP was ill-equipped to help small chapters in the South with their issues. Membership at this time consisted primarily of laborers who were very mobile, and moved often in search of work. However, even if membership was stable, the survival of an organization that advocated social equality for African Americans was vilified by whites, and members would have been subject to retaliation. In 1919, the *Sikeston Standard* praised the beating of John R. Shillady, a white man who was secretary of the NAACP, for organizing in Austin, Texas. It called Shillady a “negro-loving down Eastern white man” and said “Northern whites who go South and attempt to cause race riot by telling the blacks to demand their rights should in every instance, be given a dose that was given this white man.”²⁸³

²⁸² *Twice-A-Week Democrat* (Caruthersville, MO), January 18, 1921.

²⁸³ Editorial, *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, August 29, 1919.

The *St. Louis Argus* was another newspaper that fostered connections between African Americans in the Bootheel through news reports from different towns. During 1921-22, reporters from Charleston and Caruthersville sent updates, often weekly, on church, lodge, and other social activities. African Americans also began reporting from rural areas of Netherlands and Pascola, in Pemiscot County, which signaled the early phase of a rural-to-rural migration from the Deep South. African Americans did not live in these towns, which were all-white, but they lived on surrounding farms and thus identified themselves with these towns.

The remarkable rural demographic changes taking place are reflected by the fact that in 1920, there were no African Americans living in Pascola Township, which included the towns of Pascola and Bragg City. By the fall of 1921, however, Willie Mason was sending frequent social updates to the *St. Louis Argus*. The newly formed St. John Missionary Church featured prominently in these reports. These social reports also revealed the expansion of social networks within counties and the Bootheel, particularly through church and fraternal activities. In September of 1921, for example, African Americans in the Netherlands area informed readers that “delegates from the Grand Lodge G. S. of E. arrived Saturday and reported a good session at Charleston [Mississippi County].” On October 28, 1921, St. John Baptist Church celebrated anniversary day with a morning and evening sermon, and a dinner, attended by visitors from the towns Hayti and Wardell. Rural ministers often pastored several churches, traveling regularly between them, but it was also common practice for ministers to give guest sermons at churches in different towns. The popularity of baseball was another means by which social networks connected rural areas to each other, and to larger towns and cities. The *St. Louis Argus* updates are full of score reports of teams from Charleston, Sikeston, Caruthersville, and other communities playing each other.

The shifting geography of social and kinship ties of African Americans in the region are also evident in travel reports. In larger towns like Charleston, where many African Americans were Missouri natives, they reported social connections with people in Border South and Lower Midwest places like Sedalia, Columbia, and Cape Girardeau, Missouri, Murphysboro and Bloomington, Illinois, and Topeka, Kansas. In the newer rural communities of Netherlands and Pascola, connections were oriented more southward, to towns in Arkansas and Mississippi. During the next few years, the rural Black population of the Bootheel would dramatically increase, leading to a proliferation of churches, lodges, night clubs, and other social and religious organizations. While this was primarily a rural migration of farmers, some African Americans moved into towns like Charleston, New Madrid, Sikeston, and Caruthersville, and built upon the core community institutions built between 1880 and 1920. In 1923, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) took root in towns and rural areas, finding a home in churches, and drawing on values and traditions of ritual, patriarchy, and self-sufficiency already familiar to African American men and women involved in fraternal orders.

The rural migration of the 1920s would further rupture the bonds of paternalism that had been strained during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and would lead to the emergence of rural working-class Black leadership that complemented but also overshadowed, existing Black middle-class leadership in towns. The following chapter explores the nature of this migration, and the rural world the migrants encountered and transformed.

Chapter 2 Figures

Figure 10. Beebe Memorial C.M.E. Church, New Madrid, Missouri, 2006.



Source: Photo by author, 2006.

Figure 11. This map shows the possible location of the Louis F. Wright lynching in New Madrid, Missouri in 1902.

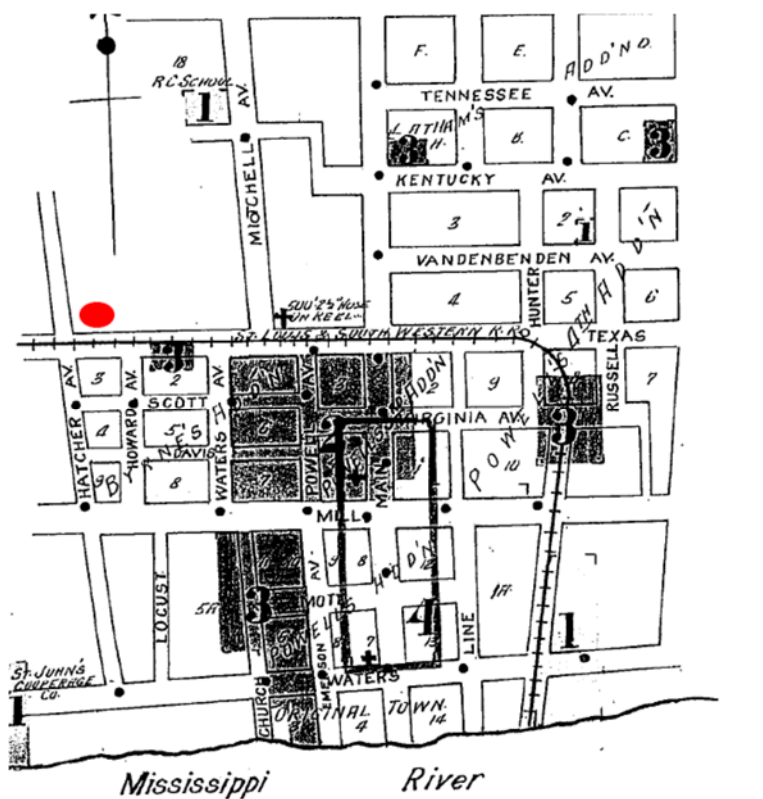


Figure 12. This map shows where African Americans were living in 1900 in New Madrid, Missouri, based on census data. The broken lines indicate streets on which African Americans were living as servants in white homes. The solid lines mark streets on which African Americans lived in independent households. The box around the number 2 in the upper right quadrant indicates the presence of the African American O'Bannon School.

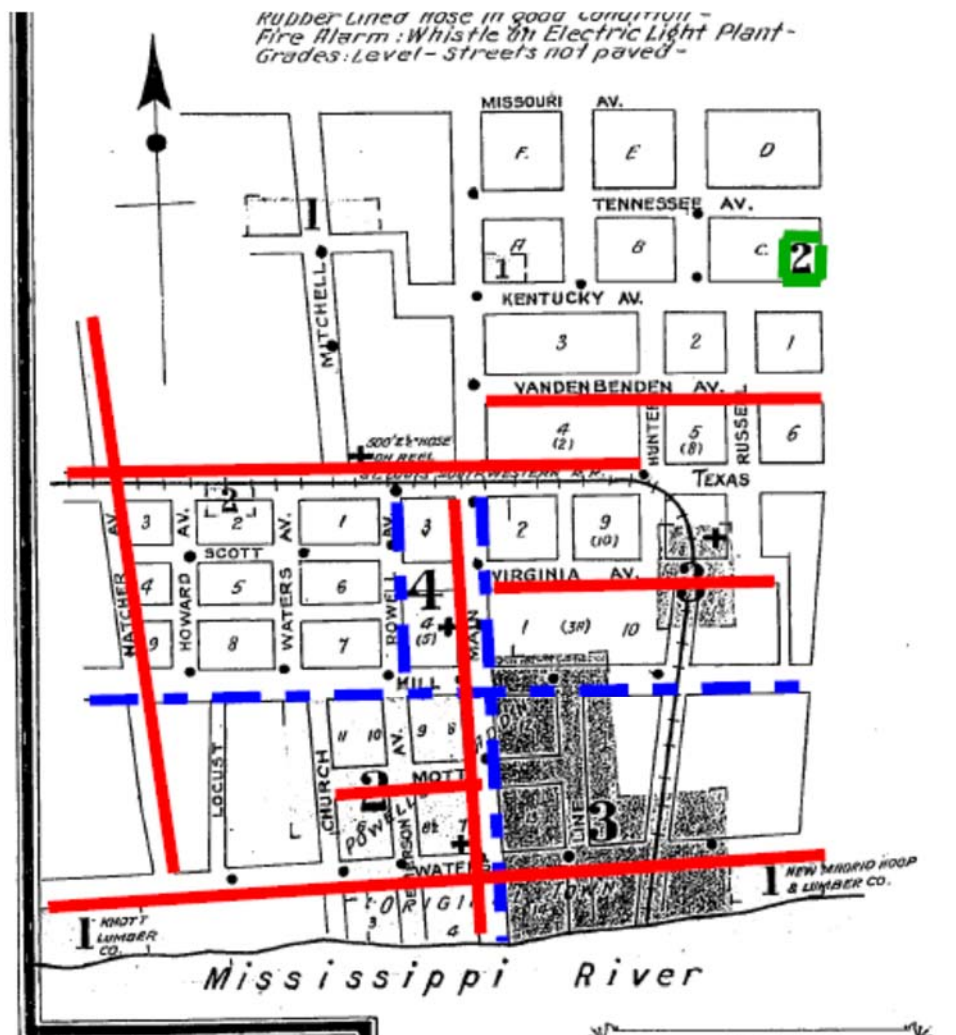


Figure 13. This map, using 1910 census data, shows the development of the African American neighborhood in the northeast quadrant of New Madrid, Missouri. The broken lines indicate streets on which African Americans were living as servants in white homes. The solid lines mark streets on which African Americans lived in independent households.



Figure 16. This map shows the location of the African American neighborhood in Caruthersville, Missouri in 1920. The 1920 population and location data were taken from the 1920 census and superimposed on part of a 1928 Sanborn map.



CHAPTER 3

FOLLOWING THE RIVER: COTTON PRODUCTION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN
MIGRATION WITHIN THE RURAL SOUTH, 1922-1930

In 1922, the loci of African American community building shifted from towns to rural areas, when farmers adopted cotton as the dominant cash crop in the region. Thousands of Black farmers migrated to take advantage of the newest cotton frontier, and migrating with them were smaller numbers of businesspeople and professionals. Marshall and Sadie Currin, for example, ran a grocery in Halls, Tennessee, and when they relocated to Charleston, Missouri, they opened the Creole Café, which was at the center of Black social and political activity well into the 1960s. Dave and Laura Randle Burnett were originally from Tupelo and West Point, Mississippi, and Dave migrated with the dream of owning his own land. His parents had originally owned a farm, but by 1910 his mother was widowed and the family had lost their land in Itawamba County. They moved to Crittenden County in Northeast Arkansas, and from there, up to Missouri, where Dave became a farm renter, and eventually an owner.²⁸⁴

These families were part of a large migration of over 15,000 African Americans that radically altered the culture and political economy of the region. The social networks and institutions they created were instrumental to labor and civil rights rebellions that resonated nationally during ensuing decades. Until this migration, the Bootheel was a culturally and politically southern region, because of slavery and migration from the Upper South, but its agricultural economy was mixed, resembling the Midwest more than the Deep South. Moreover,

²⁸⁴ Ancestry.com, 1920 *U. S. Federal Census*, “Marshel and Sadie B. Curren,” Halls, Lauderdale, TN, p. 5B; Ancestry.com, 1900 *U. S. Federal Census*, “David Bennet,” Beat 3, Itawamba, MS, p. 19B; Ancestry.com, 1910 *U.S. Federal Census*, “David Burnett,” Carolina, Itawamba, MS, p. 31B; Ancestry.com, 1920 *U. S. Federal Census*, “Dave Burnett,” Fogelman, Crittenden, AR, p. 2B; Ancestry.com, 1930 *U. S. Federal Census*, “David and Laura Burnett,” Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 4B; Ancestry.com, 1940 *U. S. Federal Census*, “David and Laura Burnett,” Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 23A; “David Burnett dies at age 81,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), June 26, 1980; “Laura Burnett services to be held,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), December 6, 1990.

the region was divided. The river counties, where slavery had been concentrated, were economically and culturally closer to the Deep South. The western part of the Bootheel, especially west of the Little River, was nearly all white, and was settled predominately by small farmers from the Upper South who did not own slaves. Between 1880 and 1920, white midwesterners from Indiana and Illinois also populated the region.

In 1922-23, cotton fever swept the entire region, bridging these intra-regional differences, and tying the Bootheel closer to the rest of the South. The shift in agriculture was a response to the drop in wheat and corn prices, and the flight of landowners and sharecroppers from boll weevil devastation in the Deep South. The Bootheel, consisting of fertile delta soil, was just far enough north that the boll weevil could not survive, but its growing season was long enough for cotton. African Americans, who had been excluded and sometimes violently expelled from all-white areas in earlier decades, were recruited for their expertise in growing cotton. They confronted violence, just as they had in the 1910s when they moved up to work in the lumber industry, but this violence could not stem the tide of migration. Unlike many of the Black workers who sojourned temporarily to the Bootheel between 1900 and 1920, a large proportion of the 1920s migrants remained in the region.²⁸⁵

This migration was part of the larger northern and westerly movement of African Americans within the South that had been occurring since the late nineteenth century. Historians have noted this movement but have done little analysis of resulting community formations in the twentieth century. Migrations of varying scales occurred within the South, with entire communities relocating in search of social and economic freedom. For African Americans,

²⁸⁵ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 56-62; Maxwell Williams, interview by Ray Brassieur, March 16, 1994, f. 50, Bootheel Project Records, C3928, SHSMO-CO; Sauer, "Geography and the Gerrymander," 409-12.

following the advancement of the cotton frontier was a strategy for seeking inexpensive land and fertile soil, and taking advantage of conditions where labor was scarce. A more nuanced understanding of why and how African Americans moved within the rural South, and the conditions they encountered, is critical for fully understanding the Black experience in the twentieth century, and for moving beyond a simple dichotomy of rural-to-urban migration. As historian Kimberly L. Phillips has argued, African Americans' migration experiences within the South, and their strategies for finding wage work while maintaining family and community ties, informed their experiences in northern cities. It also vitally important, however, to understand the journeys of African Americans who did not leave the South.²⁸⁶

The world African Americans encountered when they migrated to the Bootheel during the 1920s was that of a region in flux, rapidly transitioning from a mixture of plantations, small farms, and swamp-laden forests to capital intensive agriculture where cotton was king. Hardwoods and swamplands were disappearing, but not yet completely gone. Natural boundaries such as the Little River and Ten Mile Pond divided areas where African Americans could live and designated areas as “white man’s country.” Even along the Mississippi River, where most African Americans lived prior to the migration of the 1920s, there were settlements of white “river rats” to avoid. It was an uneven and unpredictable racial geography, but Black

²⁸⁶ Scholars have begun to look at urban migration within the South. See Louis Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South*, Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville*, and Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, Texas, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013). Valerie Grim discusses how Black sharecroppers moved in order to seek work from Black landowners “African American Landlords,” 399-416. Other books on migration that mention rural movements within the South include Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 19, 23-28; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 17; Carole Marks, *Farewell – We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 34; Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, “Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration,” in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 20-21; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 268-269; and James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 82-83, 112, 115; Phillips, *AlabamaNorth*, 6-8, 15-20.

migrants played an important role in the transformation of the region as they built churches, homes and schools, and worked on the railroad, ministered to congregations, taught school, felled and cleared trees with crosscut saws, dug ditches, built levees, and most commonly, sharecropped.²⁸⁷

This chapter argues that African Americans who participated in this migration had not given up on the dream of a sustainable, agrarian life, and the desire to own land was an important part of this dream. While some migrants arrived with plans to continue north, others saw the Bootheel as their destination, which is reflected in the time and resources they put into building churches, business, and schools. Although African Americans were staking their claim to this rural frontier through labor and community development, many whites viewed the Black migrants as outsiders and laborers, not as residents or citizens. This was revealed in the violence and exclusion they perpetrated, and also in the way their accounts of Black migration elided migrant agency.

This chapter also argues that because traditional southern plantation life and labor relations were not widespread in this region at the time of the migration, African Americans were able to push for greater autonomy than in the Deep South. This freedom was limited and contingent, but it was realized through voting and a lesser degree of white surveillance when it came to farming and Black institution-building. Greater autonomy also facilitated rural labor activism and landownership in the 1930s, which is detailed in the next chapter.

²⁸⁷ John Solomon Otto, *Final Frontiers, 1880-1930: Settling the Southern Bottomlands* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 39; Ogilvie, "The Development of the Southeast," 240; H. Riley Bock, "The Greatest Drainage Project Ever Undertaken in America: The Story of the Little River Drainage District in its First 100 Years," *The Little River Drainage District of Southeast Missouri: Celebrating 100 Years, 1907-2007*, 14, 18, 22; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 11-26.

In order to illuminate the Black migration experience in the 1920s, this chapter looks at who these Black rural migrants were, their migration paths, and how they fit into broader national migration patterns. It also looks at organizational and institutional networks they formed in towns and rural areas. Drawing upon oral histories, it provides insight into their motivations for migrating, and their perceptions and experiences in the region. In the process, this chapter attempts to show how the region became more southern, but how, at the same time, it remained a Border South area with some distinctions separating it from the Deep South, which affected African American lives and their protest strategies.

King Cotton Comes to Missouri

In 1923, thousands of African Americans made their way to the Missouri Bootheel. Some came from as far as Louisiana, and others from nearby Arkansas counties. The *Sikeston Standard* reported that “Scores of families from Arkansas move in every week. They come in wagons, trucks, cars and by train. Never probably since the opening of the Indian Territory to settlers has there been such an influx of settlers to any given locality as are coming to Southeast Missouri right now.”²⁸⁸ African American state school inspector Nathaniel C. Bruce, reporting on the condition of Black schools in Missouri, commented on the “great tide of immigrants that have come up from the south with their large families and reclaimed fertile sections of Missouri by means of great cotton and grain crops.”²⁸⁹ Bootheel planter Thad Snow recalled that “ten thousand Negro

²⁸⁸ “Large Population Jump in New Madrid,” *Sikeston* (MOO *Standard*, January 19, 1923).

²⁸⁹ N. C. Bruce, comp. *Fourth Biennial Report of the Missouri Negro Industrial Commission*, 1925-26 (Jefferson City, MO, 1927), 23.

croppers crossed the state line during January and February 1924. Many of them moved into areas of the Missouri Delta where there had been no Negroes before.”²⁹⁰ If a “mass migration” occurs “when the spatial moves of lots of people form a pattern that is recognized by participants or by hosts or others who have the capacity to publicize their observations,” according to historian James Gregory, then the rural migration to Missouri certainly qualified.²⁹¹

The cotton boll weevil was one of the primary economic reasons black farmers left southern states.²⁹² Thad Snow recalled that “the boll weevil had got meaner and moved steadily northward and had fairly destroyed the cotton crop in the lower delta in Mississippi and Arkansas. In 1923 and perhaps in 1922 and 1921 the crop was pretty much a wash-out.”²⁹³ In 1923 the *Dunklin County News* reported that “there has been considerable increase in the population of this county during the last few months owing to the coming here of cotton farmers from the boll weevil districts of the South. Eight families from Attala County, Miss., a short time ago came here and located on the Joe Ward farm west of Kennett.”²⁹⁴ According to Robert Higgs’s study of the boll weevil and urban migration, “The year 1920 opened a new stage in the Great Migration. For four consecutive years, boll weevil damage would remain at unprecedented levels. Eight of the ten cotton-belt states experienced their peak year for weevil damage during the period 1920-1923.”²⁹⁵

²⁹⁰ Snow, *From Missouri*, 157.

²⁹¹ Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, 11.

²⁹² Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 53; Robert Higgs, “The Boll Weevil, The Cotton Economy, and Black Migration, 1910-1930,” *Agricultural History* 50, no. 2 (April 1976): 349; Douglas Helms, “‘Just Lookin’ For A Home’: The Cotton Boll Weevil and the South” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1970).

²⁹³ Snow, *From Missouri*, 155.

²⁹⁴ Untitled, *Dunklin County News*, March 16, 1923.

²⁹⁵ Higgs, “The Boll Weevil,” 349.

Until 1922, the Bootheel was a mixed farming area. Touted as “the country of no crop failures” and “the Promised Land,” promoters of the region extolled the virtues of a climate that produced an abundance of every crop including wheat, corn, alfalfa, cotton, and fruit.²⁹⁶ Wheat and corn were the dominant crops, although cotton was grown to some extent in New Madrid, Pemiscot and Dunklin Counties. During World War I, farmers enjoyed profits from the wartime demand for grain, but in 1920 and 1921 the price of corn and wheat dropped suddenly. In 1922, farmers began experimenting with cotton as a way to emerge from growing debt. In 1922, the net value per acre of cotton was \$26.83, for corn it was \$6.45, and for wheat it was -\$4.59.²⁹⁷ The experiment was a success and cotton fever took hold. In 1923, the *Democrat-Argus* of Pemiscot County reported that “Cotton is king in Southeast Missouri with everybody on the payroll. Farmers have been able to pay off old debts, close up mortgages, buy needed implements and enjoy life.” In 1919, Scott County farmers planted 74 acres of cotton but by 1924 that number had jumped to 53,987 acres. Mississippi County saw a similar increase from 485 acres to 54,428 acres.²⁹⁸ These changes did not go unnoticed by other cotton-growing states. In 1923, a Pemiscot County newspaper reported that “Southeast Missouri won her way into the hearts of the Southland last week when she joined hands with Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi in staging the Tri-State Fair at Memphis, Tenn.” Missouri cotton counties not only

²⁹⁶ F.S. Bice, “Southeast Missouri: The Country of No Crop Failures”; C.F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., “The Modern Promised Land,” Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, SEMO.

²⁹⁷ Thad Snow, *From Missouri*, 154; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920, Agriculture, vol. VI, part 1, Missouri, 600-610; Michael Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941* (W.W. Norton, 1992), 82-83; Sam T. Bratton, “Land Utilization in the St. Francis Basin,” *Economic Geography*, 6, no. 4 (October 1930): 378. The Missouri Bootheel is part of the St. Francis Basin. Bratton computed these values using the *Missouri Farm Record* and the *Arkansas Crop Report* from 1922.

²⁹⁸ “South Missouri Cotton,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), January 9, 1923; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930, Agriculture, vol. II, part 1 – The Northern States, 1016-1023.

participated in the fair, but they also received special recognition when Wednesday was set aside as “Southeast Missouri Day.” Interest in the region intensified when an exhibit display showed that Missouri had led the South with an average lint cotton yield of 360 pounds.²⁹⁹

The increased cotton production was facilitated by new acreage available through lumber harvesting, drainage projects and flood protection. For centuries much of the Bootheel was covered in swamps or subject to overflow, and settlement was confined to several ridges that rose above the alluvial bottoms.³⁰⁰ In 1849 and 1850, the federal government passed the Swampland Acts and ceded hundreds of thousands of acres to the state of Missouri. In 1857, the state relinquished control to county governments. Counties sold large tracts of land to railroad and timber interests often for as little as \$1.25 an acre. After lumber companies harvested the timber, they in turn sold their acreage to speculators and farmers because they did not want to pay taxes on unprofitable land.³⁰¹

Large landowners in the Bootheel knew that in order to promote settlement and reap a profit through agriculture, much of the area would have to be drained. In 1907 the Little River Drainage District (LRDD) was formed for this purpose. The District membership was composed of all landowners affected by the drainage project; however it was run by a board of supervisors. There has been little turnover in this administrative group. When the LRDD celebrated its centennial in 2007, a total of twenty-seven landowners, five chief engineers, and five attorneys

²⁹⁹ “S.E. Missouri Exhibit Makes Ten Strike at Big Tri-State Fair,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), October 5, 1923; “Southeast Missouri Day at Memphis,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), September 21, 1923.

³⁰⁰ Max R. White, Douglas Ensminger, and Cecil L. Gregory, *Rich Land, Poor People* (Indianapolis, IN: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, 1938), 12.

³⁰¹ Otto, *The Final Frontiers*, 3; Wade, *Deering Plantation*, 11, 27.

had served on the Board throughout its history.³⁰² These men wielded great influence over a project that was one of the largest of its kind in the world, draining over 1.2 million acres through the construction of over 900 miles of ditches and 300 miles of levees. Figure 17 shows some of the cutover land the LRDD was dredging and ditching. The District was also unusual because it was a private endeavor, financed by the sale of bonds, which were paid off by taxing landowners.³⁰³ When the project began only 17 percent of the region was fit for raising a full crop. By 1930, this number was 89 percent.³⁰⁴

Migrant Journeys

African American families traveled to the Bootheel in great numbers, responding to labor recruitment, regional marketing, and information shared among friends and family. Some had heard about prospects in the region from family who had worked in the lumber industry, so when they were approached by white Missouri farmers or labor recruiters, they were receptive to moving. Alex Cooper and his family, by 1922, had already migrated from Louisville, Mississippi to Mississippi County, Arkansas after he and siblings lost their land to night riders. Cooper's employer, Mr. Sweeney, had rented more land than he could handle in Arkansas and Pemiscot County, Missouri, so he asked Cooper to move over the state line and sublease some

³⁰² "Organizational History," *The Little River Drainage District of Southeast Missouri: Celebrating 100 Years, 1907-2007*, 4.

³⁰³ H. Riley Bock, "The Greatest Drainage Project Ever Undertaken in America: The Story of the Little River Drainage District in its First 100 Years," in *The Little River Drainage District of Southeast Missouri: Celebrating 100 Years, 1907-2007*, 14, 18, 22.

³⁰⁴ White, Ensminger, and Gregory, *Rich Land*, 15.

land he had rented there. Alex's brother, Tom Cooper, had already been in the Bootheel and purchased property in the 1890s, so Alex had some idea of the opportunities available.³⁰⁵

Like the Coopers, many migrants to the Bootheel were born in Mississippi, but by the 1920s had followed the cotton frontier to Arkansas in search of better opportunity. Census statistics from 1930 show that over 40 percent of African American household heads were born in Mississippi. In contrast, most white household heads were from Missouri. Whites moved into the Bootheel during the 1920s, but their numbers were much smaller. Arkansas and Tennessee made up the next highest percentages for African Americans, while Tennessee and Illinois followed for white households.³⁰⁶

Tables 5 and 6 show the change in birth state from 1920 to 1930. The tables include head of household data for the states that contributed the largest increase to the Bootheel population. For African Americans, the increase in the population from Mississippi was 607 percent. In terms of total numbers, increases from Arkansas and Tennessee were the next highest. In terms of percentage increase, Arkansas and then Louisiana were the highest, with Tennessee following. This reflects the fact that much of the Black population prior to the 1923 migration was from Tennessee and Kentucky. For white migrants, the number of Missourians moving from other parts of the state were numerically the highest, at 2,075, but the greatest percentage changes came from Arkansas and Mississippi, at 69 and 50 percent.

³⁰⁵ Roy Cooper Jr., interview by Deborah Bailey, March 17, 1994, Bootheel Project Records, SHSMO-CO; Alex Cooper and Roy Cooper Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, August 4, 1998.

³⁰⁶ Ancestry.com, *1930 U.S. Federal Census*, Pemiscot, Dunklin, Stoddard, New Madrid, Scott, and Mississippi Counties.

Table 5.

African American Head of Household Population Increase for Selected States, 1920-1930 for the Missouri Bootheel				
	1920	1930	Change	%Change
Mississippi	342	2,417	+2,075	607%
Arkansas	134	876	+742	554%
Tennessee	435	825	+390	90%
Louisiana	60	232	+172	287%

Source: Ancestry.com, *1920-1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], 2010.

Table 6.

White Head of Household Population Increase for Selected States 1920-1930 for the Missouri Bootheel				
	1920	1930	Change	%Change
Missouri	12,321	14,427	+2,106	17%
Arkansas	1,044	1,761	+717	69%
Tennessee	4,882	5,206	+324	7%
Mississippi	283	425	+142	50%

Source: Ancestry.com, *1920-1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], 2010.

Low percentage increases in the white population demonstrates that this was a predominately African American migration. Between 1920 and 1930, the white population in the Bootheel increased from 142,965 to 148,134, or 4 percent. In contrast, the African American population increased from 7,655 to 23,338, or 205 percent. The peak of white migration to the

Bootheel was between 1890 and 1910.³⁰⁷ Figure 18 provides a visual geographic understanding of where many Black migrants were born. Large numbers were from the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas. The trajectory of their migration roughly followed the Mississippi River.

This migration was undertaken by young men and women, but also middle-aged adults with families. The proximity of Missouri to other southern states made movement feasible for older migrants who were less inclined to undertake the risks involved in long-distance migration. Participants in long journeys like the Great Migration to the North were usually young, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four.³⁰⁸ Census figures for six counties in the Bootheel indicate that younger age groups dominated over older groups within the total population, but the gap was not large. There were substantial numbers of middle-aged and older migrants. These census figures represent the entire African American population, not just those who migrated in the 1920s; however, because the number of African Americans who moved to the Bootheel in the 1920s more than tripled the existing population, the 1930 census reflects the age of many migrants. Table 7 shows the age breakdown.³⁰⁹

Table 7. (Data from National Historical Geographic Information System, www.nhgis.org)

Age Distribution of Adult African Americans in the Missouri Bootheel - 1930							
20-24	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
2359	1900	1610	3133	2259	1054	424	176

³⁰⁷ *1890-1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>. Between 1890 and 1900, the white population in the Bootheel increased from 63,726 to 88,788, or 86 percent. Between 1900 and 1910 the white population increased by over 39,000, but the percentage change was only 44 percent.

³⁰⁸ Marks, *Farewell We're Good and Gone*, 35.

³⁰⁹ Minnesota Population Center. National Historical Geographic Information System: Pre-release Version 0.1. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota 2004, www.nhgis.org

In addition to learning through kinship networks, families heard about economic opportunities through itinerant laborers and preachers and social organizations. Throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century, lumber, levee, and railroad camps dotted the Bootheel landscape. Many of the workers were African Americans who frequently moved from one location to another within the South.³¹⁰ Evangelists also regularly passed through in their effort to spread the gospel. In 1924, Rev. H. H. Humes came from Rosedale, Mississippi to hold a revival at the Baptist Church in Caruthersville, Missouri.³¹¹ Although the Bootheel's African American population was small before the 1920s migration (5 percent), Chapters One and Two demonstrated that there were sizeable Black communities along the Mississippi River, especially in the towns of Charleston, New Madrid, and Caruthersville. African Americans in these towns participated in numerous regional, state, and national organizations and thus had social networks that spread through Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Newspaper accounts of the 1920s describe activities, such as fraternal organizational meetings and church conferences that involved travel to nearby states.³¹²

Migration to rural Missouri was also influenced by promotional marketing by land companies, railroads, and groups of white civic elites that formed commercial clubs and other booster organizations. Promoters of the Bootheel began to actively market the region as early as 1902, when the St. Louis Southwestern Railway, also known as the Cotton Belt, was giving out a pamphlet called "Glimpses of Southeast Missouri."³¹³ Efforts intensified after World War I, as the lumber industry declined and landowners focused on the agricultural potential of cutover

³¹⁰ Ancestry.com, *1910-1920 U.S. Federal Census*, Pemiscot, New Madrid, and Mississippi County, MO.

³¹¹ "Big Revival at the First Baptist Colored Church," *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), March 28, 1924.

³¹² "Pascola, MO," *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1928.

³¹³ "The Awakening of Southeast Missouri," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, December 23, 1902.

areas where the timber had been harvested. Businessmen initially targeted midwestern farmers. Advertisements were placed in magazines like the *Country Gentleman*. Real estate agent C. F. Bruton created a brochure that designed to convince farmers that Southeast Missouri was “The Modern Promised Land” of agriculture. All of these publications highlighted Southeast Missouri as a region where a variety of crops could be grown, with an emphasis on the midwestern staples of corn, wheat, and alfalfa. One of the obstacles promoters had to overcome with the midwesterners was the perception that the Bootheel was a malaria-ridden land. In closing his *Country Gentleman* article William Johnson wrote: “They are a big, healthy, broad-gauge people, these Southeast Missourians... They would be a revelation to the man who thinks this region is a swamp hole peopled with anaemic wrecks whose quinine bills are bigger than their tax bills.”³¹⁴

Newspapers and commercial marketing publications were another mode of communication that some African Americans would have encountered. In 1921, the Southeast Agricultural Bureau, an organization of prominent white farmers and businessmen, began an intensive marketing campaign with an exhibit in the St. Louis Union Station. The Bureau hoped to attract 200,000 people to Missouri within five years by highlighting the “diversified productiveness” of the region. In the exhibit twelve-foot-high specimens of corn dominated, as an enticement to white midwestern farmers. Two years later, after cotton replaced corn as the favored crop, the Bureau widened its target audience and appealed to southern farmers and planters, particularly in the Memphis area. In addition to exhibiting at the Memphis Tri-State Fair, the Bureau published articles in several Sunday editions of the Memphis *Commercial*

³¹⁴ William Johnson, “Big Farming in Swampeast Missouri Where Drainage Has Revived Thousands of Rich Drowned Acres,” *The Country Gentleman*, March 13, 1920, 44; C.F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., “The Modern Promised Land,” Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, SEMO.

Appeal. These marketing efforts were not limited to print and exhibit venues. The Bureau also created a moving picture that was shown in theaters and composed broadcasts for radio stations.³¹⁵

The primary avenue through which African Americans heard about farming opportunities in the Bootheel was labor recruitment because once employers came into an area looking for workers, word rapidly spread across plantations in Arkansas and Mississippi. Sometimes individual white families went south to pick up sharecropping families, and other times farms and plantations hired recruiters. The Gideon-Anderson Lumber Company, once it had harvested most of the timber on its land, started selling some of its land, but it also ventured into cotton production in 1923. As a company with midwestern origins, it had no experience with cotton agriculture, so it “imported a large number of real old-fashioned southern cotton plantation negroes” as part of an agricultural “experiment.”³¹⁶

Labor recruiters had to tread lightly in Arkansas and Mississippi because planters in those states were facing labor shortages from outmigration. In 1923, the *Sikeston Standard* reported that a Clarksdale, Mississippi newspaper warned local sharecroppers of “the horrible treatment accorded negroes in Southeast Missouri” and advised them to “remain in the South where they have friends.”³¹⁷ This warning reveals how quickly knowledge of Missouri opportunities had spread and the effect it had. Besides labor recruiters, agricultural extension agents also played a role. R. Brown, a white agricultural extension agent for Mississippi County, described writing to “a man named Vaughn at Clarksdale, Mississippi,” which resulted in “30 families of black and

³¹⁵ “Southeast Missouri Gets Publicity in the South,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), January 30, 1923; “Southeast Missouri by Radio,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), April 8, 1924.

³¹⁶ “Local Happenings,” *Dunklin County News* (Kennett, MO), February 23, 1923.

³¹⁷ Editorial, *Sikeston* (MO) *Standard*, March 9, 1923.

white renters and share-croppers moving to this county.” The report included a picture with the following caption: “‘Some sharecroppers,’ a plantation boss; and the crop of cotton they raised. The county agent induced them to come to Mississippi County from Clarksdale, Miss.”³¹⁸

Enticing another landowners’ sharecroppers could be dangerous business. According to Bootheel farmer Bill Sikes, “there was a limit to the number of Blacks you could get out of Northeast Arkansas. If you look at Mississippi County, Arkansas, that’s a series of humongous operations down there. You don’t come down there and rob those people of their blacks because they would shoot you. You might get them out of Blytheville but you’re not going to go down to Lee Wilson Company and haul a bunch of blacks off of there ...because somebody would run you off in the Mississippi River.”

Part of what appealed to African Americans about moving to the Missouri Bootheel was the fact that it did not yet have the large, rigidly oppressive plantation operations of Mississippi, and Arkansas. While labor recruiters undoubtedly oversold the social and economic conditions of Missouri, there were advantages to moving to a region in flux, because it opened up room for negotiation and opportunity. This was what had drawn many African Americans from Mississippi to Northeast Arkansas in earlier decades, but by the 1920s, conditions were more rigid.³¹⁹

The unfamiliarity of many white Missouri farmers with cotton, and their inexperience managing plantations, were widespread, illustrating the Border South characteristic of the region. Farmers had grown cotton in particular areas, but it had not agriculturally dominated the region.

³¹⁸ Missouri Agricultural Extension Agent Report, Mississippi County, Missouri, 1923, roll 11, University of Missouri, Extension Service Records, 1912-1979, SHSMO-CO.

³¹⁹ Bill Sikes, interview by David Dickey, February 10, 1987, Scott County Oral History Collection, SEMO.

Whites needed sharecroppers and tenants who knew what they were doing, so they started recruiting African Americans. They also consulted established planters for their expertise in labor management and other issues. In the early 1920s, a group of plantation owners took a tour of the Robert E. Lee Wilson plantation in Mississippi County, Arkansas. Wilson's enterprise was expansive and organized, and exemplified the corporate turn agriculture was taking. Still, the plantation complex was relatively new compared to plantations in the Mississippi Delta and further south in the Arkansas Delta. Plantation agriculture in Northeast Arkansas had developed in the first two decades of the twentieth-century, slightly ahead of Southeast Missouri. As historian Jeannie Whayne points out in her study on Poinsett County, Arkansas, many of the new plantation owners had been businessmen who "were themselves new to the area and new to plantation agriculture." The eagerness of white landowners in the Bootheel to learn about plantation and labor management foretold the direction agriculture would take, but it also revealed an instability that African Americans and poor whites could exploit to their advantage.³²⁰

White landowners faced danger recruiting African American labor, but Black families risked the most in trying to leave plantations where they were held in debt peonage. For many, conditions of starvation, constant debt, and violence meant the risk was worth taking. Alex Cooper and his family, after settling in Pemiscot County, heard stories from other migrants who escaped dire circumstances in the Deep South. Alex Cooper's grandsons, Alex and Roy, knew a white family that "...would go to Mississippi and Alabama, and there would be families down there that were being abused. And they would slip them out and put them on that truck

³²⁰ Jeannie Whayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 5, 55-56, 64.

and bring them out at night to Gobler [Pemiscot County, Missouri]. They'd bring them out at night.” This occurred around Wardell, Missouri, and many other places as well. Alex Cooper compared it to the Underground Railroad and said for years the families lived in fear that they would be forced to return. It is unlikely that the motives of the white families were as altruistic as operators of the Underground Railroad since they charged African American families \$50 for the transportation and needed labor. Regardless of motive, what is significant is that these African American migrants deliberately, and with great risk, chose to go to Missouri because they thought it offered an escape from a life of fear and degradation.³²¹

The agency and courage of African Americans who moved further north has been elided in white accounts of migration to the Bootheel. Gladys Callow, the wife of a white farmer, came to the Bootheel in 1923 with her family when she was about seventeen. She recalled that the black farmers “just come in by the bunches. I think somebody said they did come in by the carload. People were there to get them just, I guess, kinda like in slave times.”³²² Her husband Jack, in a separate interview, said “In 1923 whenever they had that big cotton crop, why they hauled them in here in trainloads. They hauled them in just like stock.”³²³ Rhetoric about African Americans being “imported,” such as in the aforementioned article about Gideon-Anderson recruiting, was common. Migration, however, was a form of resistance African Americans employed against landowners who sought to fix Black labor, and white supremacy, in place. As historian William F. Holmes argues in his article about African Americans’ mass

³²¹ Alex Cooper and Roy Cooper Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, August 4, 1998.

³²² Gladys Callow, interview by David Dickey, February 12, 1987, Scott County Oral History Project, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

³²³ Jack Callow interview by David Dickey, May 28, 1986, Scott County Oral History Project, Scott County Oral History Project, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

migration from Georgia to Mississippi at the turn of the twentieth century, the “exodus resembled others that occurred in the postbellum South in that it represented an indigenous movement among working-class blacks to achieve a better life.”³²⁴

African Americans like the Coopers acknowledged the mass transportation of some Black sharecroppers, but they also knew from personal experience the uniqueness of family journeys and the costs and benefits involved. Joe Bankhead, pictured in Figure 19, the great-nephew of Dave and Laura Burnett, heard that his family, originally from Mississippi, left Turrell, Arkansas for Missouri because of the boll weevil. But not everyone went to Missouri. Some of the family went to Forrest City, Arkansas. His great-grandmother told him, “no matter where you move, you always leave something behind. Some would stay and some would go.” Some of the family went to cities because “it wouldn’t rain on the city job like the farm job.”³²⁵ The Cooper family experienced a similar dispersion of family. When Alex Cooper left Mississippi, most of his siblings went north.³²⁶

Despite the ruptures of family networks, migration was often necessary for a family’s safety and economic well-being. Mozetta Henry recalled that her parents, Earnest T. and Emma Hull, were originally sharecroppers from McComb, Mississippi, but they moved to Marvell, Phillips, Arkansas, hoping for something better. The Hulls and many families who migrated to the Bootheel lived in Phillips County in 1920. It was in this county, near Elaine, that Black sharecroppers in 1919 were massacred after meeting to organize a union. Earnest Hull was the

³²⁴ Whayne, *A New Plantation South*, 7; William F. Holmes, “Labor Agents and the Georgia Exodus, 1899-1900,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (Autumn 1980): 445.

³²⁵ Joe Bankhead, interview by Heidi Dodson, Charleston, Missouri, May 22, 2012, interview U-0840, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

³²⁶ Roy Cooper Jr., interview by Deborah Bailey, March 17, 1994, Bootheel Project Records, SHSM-CO.

first Black teacher at Marvell, which was quite an achievement, but rural teachers still eked out a precarious existence. The Hulls decided to move to Missouri because “They wanted to have a better life for the family...and they felt like that was a better place for them to do that.”³²⁷

Whites’ perceptions of Black passivity and subservience, in migration and daily life, influenced their actions when there was conflict over land, education, and other resources. White residents often perceived themselves as pioneers, and local histories abound with their migration stories and accounts of clearing the land and making it productive for agriculture. These narratives were used to materially and rhetorically claim land, and assert racial privilege regarding resources stemming from the land. Black migration and labor were never accorded the same rights or respect. Even Thad Snow, one of the most progressive planters in the region, who later spoke out in support of evicted sharecroppers in 1939, saw the migrants as “servile cotton croppers” and remembered that “For about fifteen years, that is, until the cropper roadside-sit-down strike of 1939, our Negro cotton croppers remained on the whole amazingly submissive.”³²⁸ What Snow perceived as submissiveness, however, was a period of focused community building that would make later rebellions possible.

The Agrarian Dream

For many African American families, the dream of purchasing land was embedded in the relentless pursuit of a better life. As historian Kimberly K. Smith has observed, the “desire to

³²⁷ Mozetta Henry, Juanita Henry, and Toni Powell, interview by Heidi Dodson, Homestown, Missouri, October 28, 2013; Whayne, *A New Plantation South*, 75-76.

³²⁸ Snow, *From Missouri*, 154-155.

establish a secure home and engage in independent production seems to be a common feature of virtually all slave cultures in the United States by the nineteenth century and would become an important element of slaves' and freedmen's conception of freedom."³²⁹ The quest for land and property ownership was a major impetus behind African American mobility within the South, and it rested on the desire for social and economic independence in a violent, white supremacist society.³³⁰

Many families who moved to the Missouri Bootheel had parents, grandparents, or other relatives who had owned land, and they associated ownership with personal qualities of strength and independence. Adam D. Holman, whose sharecropping parents Abraham and Rosie moved to the Bootheel from Mississippi and Arkansas, recalled: "My father's fathers were very ambitious people. They had lots of land and they was very, very strong in what they believed in and they didn't give up very easily. They were what you call some of those freed slaves who had property and some of them bought their freedom, and that type of situation. And my ...grandfather, he did not stand for any hanky panky along with his family."³³¹

Land ownership, then, allowed Black men (and women) to exercise authority when it came to family decisions. This contradicted the tenets of white supremacy, which held that white male authority usurped Black familial authority. White paternalistic control was directed towards African Americans of all economic statuses, but landowning families, compared to sharecropping families, were better able to resist this control economically, socially, and

³²⁹ Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 14, 18, 27, 78.

³³⁰ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 19-26; Grim, "African American Landlords," 407-09. Valerie Grim notes that African American sharecroppers migrated in search of Black landowners, because they knew they would receive better treatment as workers.

³³¹ Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012.

spatially. They worked in their own fields, produced their own food for family consumption, and often lived in Black landowning neighborhoods. Interactions with whites were less frequent on a day-to-day basis, minimizing conflict. The men and women heading households decided which crops to grow, how labor within the family would be distributed, and how disciplinary issues with children would be handled.

In the Holman family, this tradition of family autonomy was passed down to younger generations. Adam Holman's parents were sharecroppers, so it was more challenging and dangerous to assert family authority, but they found ways to do so nevertheless. He recalled that "we were family people so consequently, if something happened within the family, then it was okay, but if somebody on the outside want to get involved with the family, it's a no-no, you had to go to my father." If Adam and his siblings went to pick cotton for a landowner in Missouri, his father Abraham communicated to the employer that if there was a problem with his son's work, the landowner should take the issue to Abraham, who would deal with it himself. "So, that's the basics the way we were brought up, a family type situation, father was the head of the house, the mother was the supporter to the father and we was kind of successful in the way that we conducted things."³³²

Abraham Holman also used his parental authority to push the boundaries of Jim Crow practices. In Missouri, African Americans were not required to ride in the back of the bus by law, but segregated customs were entrenched. When Adam got ready to leave Missouri to attend Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he remembered: "My father took me onto the bus, and he made it clear to the bus driver, not by saying 'Mr. Bus Driver,' he says to me, loud enough so the bus driver got the message. He says 'I'm gonna put you right here in this seat [in the middle of the

³³² Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012.

bus].’ And he says ‘Don’t you move.’ He says ‘Don’t you go any further back.’ But you know, I could get up and go to the bathroom and that type situation, but he says ‘But you stay right here.’ And the bus driver, he heard him and never said a word.” Adam Holman felt his father’s assertiveness made situations more comfortable for him and his siblings, but as sharecroppers, “we never was able to feel that we were on our own because we were never able to purchase land or anything like that.”

In addition to increased autonomy in family decision-making, landownership often provided better access to education for children because they did not have to frequently move. For Holman “school was a thing that was very depressing in that particular time. Because in fact, we were probably considered migrant workers in many instances. We’d probably work on one farm this year, the next year you go to another farm and then probably next year you go to another farm.”³³³ Each move meant adjusting to new schools that were overcrowded, often dilapidated, and understaffed. Land ownership provided the luxury of staying in one place, and establishing long-term relationships with teachers, classmates, and neighbors. Still, there could be disadvantages to growing up in a land-owning family, depending on the family’s economic security. Often, the labor of children was essential to survival of a farm, especially if it was mortgaged. As a result, it was often girls in the family who were able to continue their education at the high school level, and it was more unusual for boys in rural areas.³³⁴

When it came to political independence, and self-determination with regard to how a person spent his or her time, land ownership provided a basis for resisting white demands. Jim

³³³ Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012.

³³⁴ Jim Robinson Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, October 26, 1998; Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012, Hazel Crest, IL, interview U-0856, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

Robinson Jr.'s parents bought land in Mississippi County, and passed acreage down to him. The younger Jim also followed in his father's footsteps as a political organizer in the county. His father, and other Black leaders Louis Moss, Arthur Scott, and Lommie Lane organized Black voters across the county in support of the candidates they believed would best serve their interests. White landowners and politicians, then, had a vested interest in how African Americans would vote.

Some whites were respectful of this political power, but Jim Robinson Jr. recalled that Abbie Story, a prominent landowner, "was kind of Mr. Charlie-ish. In other words, he wanted to come to the field [and say] 'You ain't got no business in the field! You need to be out there getting these votes lined up!'" Robinson's attitude was "Nobody tells me what to do. You don't do me that way at all. He done my brother like that. I just heard about it. Man, don't you never—don't you never put your foot on my property and tell me what to do." For Robinson, his land represented a space in which his authority was inviolate. At the same time, because he owned property, his personal autonomy extended beyond the farm. He had more leeway to determine how he wanted to allocate his time. Making sure a farm stayed productive was time-intensive, and essential to family survival. While politics were important, economic well-being was a priority.³³⁵

Rural African Americans' desire for economic independence and family autonomy, and their belief in race pride, self-reliance, and spiritual redemption attracted many to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s. Many of the values espoused by Garvey were not new, but he synthesized them in a way that resonated strongly with rural African Americans in the Bootheel, and other parts of the South. Scholars have focused on

³³⁵ Jim Robinson Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, October 26, 1998.

the urban UNIA presence, but as historians Mary Rolinson and Jarod Roll have revealed, rural divisions were prolific in the South. Throughout the 1920s, African Americans started fifteen UNIA divisions in the Bootheel. Most of these divisions were started after the rural migration of 1923, and migrants probably brought their knowledge of the organization with them from Arkansas or Mississippi, where the UNIA was also strong.

The UNIA was founded in 1914 by Marcus Garvey in Jamaica, and it quickly expanded in the United States. Garvey advocated for the redemption of Africa from white colonial power, and the creation of a country for Black people, where their social and economic progress would not be impeded by white oppression. This form of Black Nationalism resonated with many African Americans who were disillusioned by the unfulfilled promise of democracy and citizenship in the United States. In the Bootheel, it is unclear whether members anticipated moving to a new homeland in Africa, but they did support the idea of creating a Black nation. The idea of the spiritual redemption of Africa also resonated strongly with Black rural southerners. In the Bootheel, UNIA members adapted the ideology of Garveyism to their own circumstances, and turned their attention to building strong rural and town communities in Missouri anchored by the leadership of landowners, ministers, and businessmen. According to Mary Rolinson, Garveyites in the South were “isolated, living in black majority communities and financially tied down.” In the Bootheel, African American were a minority of the population, but they often lived in rural clusters, or neighborhoods, because it facilitated self-defense, institution-building, and economic survival.³³⁶

³³⁶ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 54-56, 62-75; Mary G. Rolinson *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-7, 17, 27-38.

Robert and Alice Greyer, who settled near Wyatt, in Mississippi County became UNIA members. During the 1920s and early 1930s, Robert made a living as a sharecropper or share-renter, but by 1935 he was a widower, and making a living as a farmer was becoming more difficult across the region. Greyer moved into the small town of Wyatt, and in 1939 worked as a restaurant manager, undoubtedly for a Black business-owner, for \$300 per year, about double what many sharecroppers and laborers were clearing. His granddaughter recalled that he also had a little store in Wyatt. Robert and Alice passed on to their children the importance of leadership within the Black community. Their daughter, Lucinda Greyer Crenshaw, became a leader of the North Wyatt Women's Club and fought for the construction of a Black school in the 1940s, a struggle that is addressed in Chapter Six.³³⁷

Dave and Laura Burnett also joined the UNIA. As mentioned previously, Dave's parents had owned a farm, but his mother had lost the land by the time he was twelve. The desire to own land and his commitment to being a leader in the rural Wyatt community took him down several organizational paths. He started out as a renter, which meant he owned his own equipment and was less likely to end up in debt at the end of a year. He was able to save enough money to purchase land between 1930 and 1940. As landowners, Dave and Laura Burnett achieved a degree of social prominence. In 1939, he lent his support to the New Madrid County Colored Farm Homestead Subsistence Association, a group of farmers trying start a cooperative farm enterprise in New Madrid County. In 1940, he became an early member of the Charleston NAACP. Laura Burnett was one of only two women in Bootheel UNIA divisions who was

³³⁷ "Wyatt, MO," *Negro World*, July 9, 1927; Ancestry.com, *1920 U. S. Federal Census*, "Robert Grear," St. Francis, Lee, AR, p. 12B; Ancestry.com, *1930 U. S. Federal Census*, "Robert G. Geer," Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 2A; Ancestry.com, *1940 U. S. Federal Census*, "Robert Greer," Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 2A; F. Brown, interview by Heidi Dodson, Wilson City, MO, October 28, 2012; "Ask Negro Pupils be Permitted to Attend White School at Wyatt," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), September 21, 1948.

recorded as an office holder. As historian Jarod Roll has noted, the UNIA was patriarchal in its structure, but it afforded women, including many unmarried women, frequent opportunities to speak at meetings. These experiences undoubtedly built self-confidence and shaped their participation in other spheres of public life.³³⁸

The UNIA was also an important avenue for creating new social ties in the context of massive in-migration. To provide some perspective: in 1920, there were ten African American household heads living in Mississippi County, Missouri who were born in Mississippi. In 1930, there were 384. To a significant degree, the migration re-made rural society. Churches and fraternal orders had long been central to Black community building. The UNIA, which often held meetings in churches, blended the rituals and social benefits of fraternal organizations with spirituality, a powerful combination. The organization's connections with these core Black institutions helps explain its rapid growth in the Bootheel.³³⁹

The actual membership of the UNIA, in terms of numbers, was small compared to the total population. As Jarod Roll notes, most sharecroppers and laborers could not afford to pay the dues for membership. What is important to consider is the fact that UNIA divisions spanned the region, and thus had a geographically wide sphere of influence. Moreover, the organization tapped into a worldview that was held by many African Americans who were not formal members. Rev. Owen Whitfield, a Baptist minister and later an STFU organizer in the 1930s,

³³⁸ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 66; Joe Bankhead, interview by Heidi Dodson, May 22, 2012; Ancestry.com, *1940 U. S. Federal Census*, "David and Laura Burnett," Ohio, Mississippi, MO, p. 23A; J. A. Alexander to Henry A. Wallace, April 20, 1939, f. "January-June 1939," box 230, General Correspondence, Records of the FHA, NARA-Chicago; Rev. C. L. Williams to L. C. Black, October 22, 1940, f. Membership Reports, Missouri, Cape Girardeau-Kansas City, box II-C256, Part II – Branch File, 1940-1955, Records of the NAACP, LOC. Dave Burnett's great-nephew, Alonzo Bankhead, remembers Dave buying land in 1942. Census records suggest he bought land earlier. He owned his own home in 1940, which for a farmer, often suggests landownership.

³³⁹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 55, 66-69.

was not a member but he attended one or more meetings. The fact that UNIA meetings were held in churches meant the congregants were aware of the organization and its values, even if they did not join. Copies of the *Negro World*, the organization's main publication, were probably passed from hand to hand until they disintegrated. And the news reported in the *Negro World* would have provided African Americans in the Bootheel a sense of their place within the larger African Diaspora as well as the United States. While many of the values of the UNIA, as historian Mary Rolinson points out, were not new, the UNIA helped to reinforce their relevance to Black rural life in the 1920s.³⁴⁰ The tenets of hard work, producerism, landownership, self-reliance, and race pride remained strong in subsequent decades, despite the UNIA's organizational decline in the late 1920s in the Bootheel.

Many African Americans aspired to economic independence through landownership during the 1920s, but the obstacles they faced, made achieving this dream difficult. One challenge was that many white individuals were not willing to sell to African Americans. When Black farmers migrated into the region, they did not have personal ties to white farmers, which had historically been an important factor in facilitating Black landownership in the South.³⁴¹ African Americans had greater success purchasing land closer to 1930, when large lumber and insurance companies decided to sell land. When Black farmers were able to purchase land in the 1920s, it was often un-cleared or flood-prone land. If it had been ditched, it usually had high drainage taxes. Moreover, the white tradition of demarcating the Little River as a "dead line," past which African Americans could not live, was still largely in place, although it was in the

³⁴⁰ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 63-65; Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, 24-25.

³⁴¹ Mark Schulz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 33-51.

process of being transformed.³⁴² In 1923, the *Dunklin County News* proudly stated “We have no negroes on our farms.”³⁴³

Farmers in Pemiscot County found the greatest opportunity for land ownership. Land records testify to their success, and their enduring struggles to hold onto farms. In 1910, there were eleven black farm owners in Pemiscot County, Missouri. By 1920, there were thirty-seven owners, and in 1925 the number had peaked at ninety-one.³⁴⁴ Discrimination forced African Americans onto marginal land, yet that very marginality also made it affordable. Wiley and Harriet Anderson of Pemiscot County took advantage of lower prices when they purchased two tracts of land in 1916 and 1918. The first tract was sixty acres, for which they signed a deed of trust in the amount of \$1,700 with Prudential Company of America in New York at a rate of 5 percent interest. The second tract of land was forty acres for which they borrowed \$2400 from Prudential at 5.5 percent interest. The purchase price for the first tract, excluding interest paid, was just over \$28 an acre. The second tract, two years later, was \$60 an acre.³⁴⁵ It is likely that the land the Andersons purchased was at least partially unimproved or vulnerable to overflow. By 1924, the best acreage was selling for anywhere from \$300 to \$1,000 per acre.³⁴⁶

After the Andersons purchased their two tracts of land in 1916 and 1918, they had to take out several additional loans in order to keep up their payments. Interest rates rose to 6 and 8

³⁴² Ogilvie, “The Development of the Southeast,” 240.

³⁴³ “Dunklin County Has Had No Negro Trouble,” *Dunklin County News* (Kennett, MO), March 9, 1923.

³⁴⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1910, Agriculture, vol. VI, Missouri, 924; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920, Agriculture, vol. VI, part I, Missouri, 585; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 58.

³⁴⁵ Deed of Trust, February 16, 1916, Volume 61, p. 512, Recorder of Deeds Office, Caruthersville, Missouri; Deed of Trust, April 1, 1918, vol. 70, p. 118, Recorder of Deeds Office, Caruthersville, MO.

³⁴⁶ “Acre of Land 1 ½ Miles of Kennett sells for \$500.00,” *Dunklin County News* (Kennett, MO), April 20, 1923; “400,000 Sale of Farm Lands in New Madrid,” *Democrat-Argus* (Caruthersville, MO), February 19, 1924.

percent. In 1923, they were unable to keep up with payments on the second 40-acre tract they had purchased, and it was sold at auction in January 1923.³⁴⁷

Purchasing land on credit allowed black farmers in the Bootheel to step up a rung on the agricultural ladder, but staying there was difficult. Interest rates in the Bootheel were not higher for African Americans than for white landowners, but even the typical 6 to 8 percent was a heavy burden.³⁴⁸ This was particularly true if subsequent loans involved higher land prices. The Andersons' financial battle and that of other Bootheel farmers was complicated by another financial burden not mentioned in deeds of trust. The taxes imposed by the Little River Drainage District, as well as smaller county-run drainage projects, could be as much as five dollars per acre each year.³⁴⁹ The difficulty that many farmers faced in paying this tax is evident in the numerous tax cases that appear in the Pemiscot County Circuit Court judgments books. For example, in May 1925, Drainage District No. 3 filed suit against Wiley and Harriet Anderson and their mortgage company for taxes past due. They were four years behind on their payments. Because of this, a special lien was placed on their land³⁵⁰.

In 1929, the Pemiscot Land and Cooperage Company, like other lumber-related industries, began to sell some its land because of tax burdens. This provided an opportunity for African Americans, but they started out with the deck stacked against them. The local manager,

³⁴⁷ Deed of Release, February 16, 1916, vol. 69, p. 364; Deed of Trust, February 1, 1919, vol. 72, p. 164; Deed of Trust, March 11, 1920, vol. 78, p. 48; Deed of Release, March 29, 1920, vol. 84, p. 71; Trustees Sale, January 20, 1923, vol. 63, p. 416, Recorder of Deeds Office, Caruthersville, MO.

³⁴⁸ The statement about interest rates being the same comes from my research in deed records. While I did not do an extensive study, when I searched for the land transactions for particular families, I looked at other deeds from the same time period to see what interest rates were typical. I did not, however, compare other terms of the loan, such as length of time for repayment.

³⁴⁹ C. F. Bloker to Gentlemen, January 2, 1929, box 12, f. 2, Pemiscot Land and Cooperage Company, HPC; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 20.

³⁵⁰ Judgment Book, Circuit Court of Pemiscot County, vol. 28, May 8, 1925, Caruthersville, MO.

C. F. Bloker, reported to the company that "We inclose [sic] herewith copies of two land contracts that we have recently made covering the sale of two 40 acre tracts. These people are colored folks and we consider the land well sold due to the fact that it is in the territory where we have such a heavy drainage tax. The average tax at this date on this land is approximately \$5.00 per acre." He went on to explain that "It is our intention to make the 400 acres of which this land is a part a negro settlement with the idea in mind of selling to negroes."³⁵¹

Despite the struggles that black farmers like the Andersons faced, some held on to their land and built communities in which friendship and kin networks provided financial and social support. In Pemiscot County, several black landowners in one particular cluster had family connections to each other. For example, Harriet Anderson's father, Jack Russell owned land just west of her and her husband Wiley. Ed Hickman's son-in-law, A. L. Ferguson, owned an adjacent tract just south of his own land.³⁵² Many landowners came to Missouri at different times and from different places; however the formation of community is evident not only from the kinship ties they created, but also from the construction of at least one church and school nearby. The bonds these landowners forged were crucial to navigating the murky, sometimes dangerous waters of race relations in the Bootheel.

There is a tendency among scholars and the public to think of rural space as relatively homogenous, particularly when it comes to the lives of Black sharecroppers. Images of vast cotton fields and rows of tenant houses reinforce this seeming monotony. Social relations in the Bootheel, however, were tied to rural neighborhoods. Even though sharecropping families were

³⁵¹ C. F. Bloker to Gentlemen, January 2, 1929, box 12, f. 2, Pemiscot Land and Cooperage Company, HPC.

³⁵² Pemiscot County Plat Book, 1930, Township 17North, Range 12East, University of Missouri Digital Library, <http://digital.library.umsystem.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=platic>; Commissioner's Report, Mollie Hickman et al to Oscar Ferguson et al., Pemiscot County Missouri Circuit Court Record, vol. 92, p. 471, Recorder of Deeds Office, Caruthersville, MO.

highly mobile, they often remained in one county and maintained relationships across rural neighborhoods. The neighborhoods were frequently named after a village, natural feature of the landscape, or a school or church. Dr. Eugene Speller spent his childhood in rural Mississippi County. The son of sharecroppers Bud and Nicula, he was born on the Goodin plantation, but subsequently lived at Fish Lake, Windyville, Samos, and Pinhook. Windyville was not a town but rather was a rural neighborhood associated with Windyville School. Pinhook was originally a rural neighborhood named for Pinhook Ridge. A farming area in the Bird's Point-New Madrid Floodway, the ridge was originally occupied by white farmers, but in the 1940s it became the site of a Black land-owning community.³⁵³

There was a strong sense of community in Windyville and Pinhook. Dr. Speller recalled that “we went to their churches, they went to our churches...on Labor Days and our picnic days.” The eventual decline of those communities due to farm mechanization and corporatization was heartbreaking to former residents. One of the families Dr. Speller was close to was the Cage family of Windyville. Like many families, C. C. and Georgia Cage had migrated from Mississippi to northeast Arkansas, where they joined the UNIA in 1923. They later moved to Fulton County, Kentucky, then across the river to Missouri, where they purchased land in 1934.³⁵⁴ The children of C. C. and Georgia Cage, like Dr. Speller, moved to northern cities. Still, Speller explained, “right now it’s pretty painful for some of us to go back to see that all the blacks are gone. I talked to Bessie Cage ...she said she took her grandkids out and she was explaining to them and she said ‘Eugene, I almost cried because it’s all now commercial farming

³⁵³ Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012.

³⁵⁴ “Defense Fund Subscribers Whose Liberality We Gratefully Acknowledge,” *Negro World*, September 8, 1923; C. C. and Georgia Cage, deed of trust, book 116, page 353, October 22, 1934, Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston,, MO.

and the farms there combined into bigger farming. It's not like you and I knew it.'" There used to be small houses everywhere, but today they are gone.³⁵⁵ Although many of these rural communities are not visible today, in the 1920s they were important sites for forging community ties that shaped later social movements, and are still maintained through annual reunions.

**Border South Social and Economic Conditions:
"They was bad, but they wasn't quite as bad."**

African Americans who migrated to the Bootheel found it fell short of the Promised Land, but they found ways to create spaces of self-determination. Their perceptions of region and community are important for providing a counterpoint to white-focused histories and understanding the Black experience in the Border South. Migrants who moved up from the Deep South thought social and economic conditions would be an improvement over their situations in Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi. What they found is that, in the words of Aretha Robinson, race relations "was about the same, but they wasn't *quite* as bad as they was south. Further south than we are here." Dr. Eugene Speller expressed a similar sentiment. "The people who populated the rural communities came from plantations in Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee that were bad, to plantations in Southeast Missouri that were not *as* bad." Older generations, who lived through the decades of sharecropping and day labor, perceived the Bootheel as part of the South. It was not part of the Deep South, however, and there were certain characteristics that increased the quality of life, even if it was only marginally and contingently.

³⁵⁵ Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012.

One advantage was that in the 1920s, and even into the 1930s, there were natural resources that some sharecroppers could access to mitigate the destitution of sharecropping. The landscape had significantly changed from the late nineteenth century, in that much of the timber had been harvested and swamps drained, but this transformation was not complete. Aretha Myles Robinson's parents, Henry and Asell Myles, moved their family to the Texas Bend community about five miles north of Charleston, near the Mississippi River. Robinson recalled "My Dad was a great hunter, so we always had food...He was another Daniel Boone. Girl, he was great, he hunted anything...in the wintertime he caught his fur, and he sold the meat from fur, and the people bought the fur and, that's how we made with our sharecropping crop. I think we had about fifteen acres of cotton. Hunted raccoons, rabbits, mink, skunks, all kinds of fur...squirrels in the spring, birds, wild geese, ducks, fish, lots and lots."³⁵⁶

Hunting and fishing were a means of survival, but they were also two of the most popular forms of recreation. Men tended to do the hunting, but fishing was a favorite pastime of both women and men. Charles Jackson, who grew up near Wyatt in Mississippi County, loved to hunt. He recalled that two other men in the area, Dave Burnett and Louis Scaife, were also avid hunters. In fact, Burnett and Scaife were unusual in that they actually kept bird dogs for hunting.

The fact that some of the land in the Bootheel had not been completely taken over by crops aided survival. Joe Bankhead's uncle Dave Burnett taught him how to live off the land by picking "blackberries, dewberries, poke salad and wild greens." If families lived in an area that had not been completely cleared, they could also use the lumber for firewood and to build houses, churches, and other buildings.

³⁵⁶ Aretha Robinson, interview by Heidi Dodson, Sikeston, MO, May 31, 2012, interview U-0852, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

Gardens, usually cultivated by women, were also an important factor to community survival, and were part of a sharing economy. Sharecropping families often found it difficult to maintain a garden because they did not have the tools or the time, or their employers required every patch of land be planted in crops. When families were able to create space, however, they often shared the harvest with neighbors. Mozetta Henry, pictured in Figure 20, grew butter beans, peas, cabbage and “most everything gardenable.” She raised enough to feed her family, so she “didn’t have to buy too much stuff,” but she also gave it away. She used to raise butter beans “by the washtubs. And I would get mine and give ‘em washtubs to them. Mr. Johnson was an older man...he and his wife would come over and help me shell and I would give ‘em different kind of [food] from my garden.”³⁵⁷ Gardens were not the sole purview of women. Adam Holman recalled that his father, Abraham, used to have three to five gardens every year. “If you had a plot of land at your house and you didn’t want to garden it, he’d come over, he’d do it.”³⁵⁸ This tradition of sharing garden produce continues today. Older family members who remained in the Bootheel grow greens and other vegetables, and family members who have moved to cities like St. Louis travel back home to get the fresh, familiar foods on which they were raised.³⁵⁹

The ability to keep a milk cow, or pigs, also made a huge difference in family health. Most sharecroppers were not able to do this because they could not afford to feed the animals or the landlord did not provide them space for grazing or a barn. Dr. Eugene Speller’s father, Bud

³⁵⁷ Mozetta Henry, Juanita Henry, and Toni Powell, interview by Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2013.

³⁵⁸ Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012. The ability of the Henry and Holman families to grow gardens was facilitated by the fact that they moved into federal Delmo housing projects for farm laborers in the early 1940s, which allocated room for a substantial garden. These projects are discussed in the Chapter Five. In the mid-1940s, the Henrys and Holmans purchased their homes.

³⁵⁹ F. Brown, interview by Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2012.

“talked Mr. Goodin into letting him have a cow” and he was the only family on the plantation who had one. When Eugene’s cousins came to visit, they “always got to drink milk and that was different, you see.” Their cow was named Flora, and every morning his father would take her across the road near Fish Lake, and tied her with a long chain so she could graze.³⁶⁰

The examples described above are not meant to detract from the harshness of the sharecropping system developing during the 1920s, or elide the power that whites often asserted to prevent families from growing gardens or using timber. Frequently, the ability of Black families to use natural resources was contingent on white permission. Large landowner R. B. Oliver complained that his sharecroppers had cut down trees to build a church. He did not object to the church, *per se*, but he wanted them to ask permission from him first.³⁶¹ The sharecroppers who built the church, however, clearly did not think this was necessary, or they decided to act in opposition to this expectation. Churches were essential to Black communities, not optional. These examples illustrate how, in the midst of daunting impediments, African Americans used a myriad of creative strategies to survive and build communities.

Building Church Networks

One of the most important developments taking place during the 1920s was the construction of churches. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues, the Black church was much more than a place of worship: it also constituted a “public sphere in which values and

³⁶⁰ Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012; Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, Hazel Crest, IL, October 18, 2013.

³⁶¹ Ogilvie, “Development of the Southeast,” 228.

issues were aired, debated, and disseminated throughout the larger black community.”

Moreover, the physical space of the church housed a variety of community programs, including education and recreational activities.³⁶² In the Bootheel, thousands of families moved into rural areas that had been all white, so institutions had to be built from the ground up or adapted to buildings formerly used by whites. The geographical expansion of these institutions represented the growth of regional religious and educational organizations, such as the Illinois-Southeast Missouri C.M.E. Conference, Missionary Baptist districts, and networks of Pentecostal churches. There has not been a comprehensive historical survey of African American churches in the Bootheel, but newspaper reports indicate that by the 1880s sizeable towns like Charleston, New Madrid, and Caruthersville had at least one C.M.E., Baptist, or A.M.E. church, and in most cases all three. In 1926, the Department of Commerce conducted a Survey of Religious Bodies. It shows that there were 971 Black Baptist members in the Bootheel, and 792 A.M.E. church members. As Roll has pointed out, this is rather surprising, because in the South, Baptist churches typically far outnumber A.M.E. churches. The survey results are questionable, however, because they record zero members for the C.M.E. Church or Church of God in Christ (COGIC), when there were many active congregations in these denominations.³⁶³

The COGIC, or Sanctified Church, first took root in the Bootheel in the 1910s in Pemiscot County, which experienced the first small wave of Black rural migration that exploded in the 1920s. According to historian Elton H. Weaver III, William Wallace Austin was the first COGIC pastor to evangelize in the Bootheel. Austin heard Charles H. Mason, the founder of the

³⁶² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7-13.

³⁶³ U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, Census of Religious Bodies, County File 1926, Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com.

COGIC denomination, preach in Mississippi. He became ordained and felt he was called to preach in Missouri. He established the North Sixth Street COGIC in Hayti, Missouri, and may have been involved in the organization of the Progressive COGIC church in 1912 in Caruthersville. In 1924, the Pullen and Warfield families also brought their faith from Schlater, Mississippi in Leflore County. They settled in Stoddard County and began worshipping in a house. Elder Lewis Caruthers, COGIC pastor from Charleston, helped them organize a church, and in subsequent decades, members of the Warfield and Pullen families became ordained preachers in Stoddard and Pemiscot Counties.³⁶⁴

L. H. Brown, from New Madrid, attended Beebe Chapel C.M.E. Church, but he grew up next to the COGIC church on Russell Street, shown in Figure 21. He remembered that the church would have annual baptisms that took place in the Mississippi River. His house was a place where church members cooked fish and fried chicken for people who came from as far as Arkansas.³⁶⁵ Baptisms and revivals brought people together from miles around, and fostered a regional Bootheel-based identity, but they also reinforced ties to communities further south from which many African Americans had migrated. Such gatherings continued well into the twentieth century.

Missionary Baptist Churches probably comprised the greatest proportion of new organization and construction, appearing in practically every rural neighborhood and in towns. In August 1923, for example, African Americans in the vicinity of Kennett, in Dunklin County, held a two-day barbecue to raise funds to build a Missionary Baptist church in town. Until the

³⁶⁴ Elton H. Weaver III, "Preaching Faith to Heal Them: W. W. Austin (1885-1931) and the Origins of the North Sixth Street Church of God in Christ," *The African American Pulpit* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 22-25; "This Week Saluting Church of God in Christ Bell City," *Daily Standard* (Sikeston, MO), April 29, 1966; J. C. Pullen, "This Week Saluting Church of God in Christ, Wardell, MO," *Daily Standard* (Sikeston, MO), March 25, 1966.

³⁶⁵ L. H. Brown, interview by Heidi Dodson, New Madrid, MO, May 22, 2006.

1920s, Kennett had a very small Black population, and the rural environs of Dunklin County were nearly all-white. As Chapter One described, African Americans began migrating into the County to work in lumber and railroad industries in the 1910s. Many left after white night riders tried to force them out. With the shift to cotton production, however, the Black population in Dunklin County grew from 147 to 461 persons. This was still only 1.3 percent of the county population, but African Americans clustered in rural pockets where they found farming opportunities and built several enduring communities.³⁶⁶

In the 1920s, Black Baptist churches in the Bootheel were part of the Third District, Southeast Missouri Baptist Association, but by the late 1920s and early 1930s they were divided into smaller districts.³⁶⁷ The Christian Liberty Baptist Association, Second District, for example, covered Scott, Stoddard, and Mississippi Counties. One of the early organizers of the Christian Liberty Association was Rev. S. D. Woods, who was originally from the Lexington area in Holmes County, Mississippi, and moved up to Sikeston with his family in 1923. In Mississippi, he was a farmer and merchant, and he had one year of college education, so he came to Missouri with economic and social resources. He bought property in Sikeston, and became very active in civic affairs, ardently supporting education and voting. In 1924, he started the Second Baptist (St. John Missionary) Church.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ 1920-1930 U. S. Federal Census, Population, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>

³⁶⁷ They were likely members of this association much earlier. In 1912, the Southeast Missouri Association met in Poplar Bluff, in Butler County, and delegates from Cape Girardeau, just north of the Bootheel attended. "Cape Girardeau, MO," *Plaindealer* (Topeka, KS), September 20, 1912.

³⁶⁸ Ancestry.com, 1940 U.S. Federal Census, "Sydney D. Woods," Sikeston, Scott County, MO, p. 12A; Ancestry.com, 1910 U.S. Federal Census, "Sydney Woods," Beat 1, Holmes County, MS, p. 7B; Ancestry.com, 1900 U.S. Federal Census, "Sydney Woods," Beat 5, Holmes County, MS, 19B; St. John Missionary Baptist Church pamphlet, Bootheel Project Records, SHSMO-CO.

Some of the preachers in Missionary Baptist churches in the Bootheel had a significant amount of education and enough financial resources to be considered middle class, but most were working class. They supplemented their religious calling through sharecropping and alternately pastored at several churches. Rev. J. O. Pernermon and his first wife Beatrice moved to Missouri via Mississippi and Arkansas, and he became a moderator in the Christian Liberty Baptist District. He had no formal education, but he and his wife could read and write. The Pernermons lived near Morley in Scott County, and Rev. Pernermon was pastor of Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church No. One, in Canalou, and Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church No. Two in Bell City.³⁶⁹ He also preached at Windyville, in Mississippi County, and Eugene Speller recalled that “he was probably the best pastor I’ve ever had and I think so highly of him.” Although Pernermon had no formal grade school education, he had clearly dedicated himself to learning, because Dr. Speller remembered him being “better educated than any minister that we’d had.” His wife was also “very good at teaching.”³⁷⁰ When he was not ministering to his congregations, Rev. Pernermon was at different times a tenant farmer and farm laborer. In 1945, he and his second wife, Mamie, purchased a farm.³⁷¹

The Baptist churches, while organized in districts, were different from the hierarchy of the C.M.E. and A.M.E. churches, in that the Baptist denomination “prized the autonomy of individual believers and congregations in their relationship with God.”³⁷² Moreover, individual

³⁶⁹ “J. O. Pernermon,” *Daily Standard* (Sikeston, MO), January 12, 1973.

³⁷⁰ Eugene Speller, interview with Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012.

³⁷¹ Ancestry.com, *1930 U. S. Federal Census*, “John O. Pernermon,” Morley, Scott, MO, p. 6B; Ancestry.com, *1940 U. S. Federal Census*, “John O. Pernermon,” Morley, Scott, MO, p. 17A; J. O. and Mamie Pernermon, deed of trust, Stoddard County Deed Index, vol. 9, p. 641-643, December 22, 1945, Stoddard County Courthouse, Bloomfield, MO.

³⁷² Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor’s Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 3.

churches did not have to belong to the district associations they were non-connectional. A group of people could start a Baptist church without permission from the Baptist conference. This autonomy worked well for communities of sharecroppers in isolated rural areas, where educational requirements and other forms of church bureaucracy were burdensome.³⁷³

Male Baptist ministers were most often mentioned in newspaper accounts of church activities, but Black women were the backbone of the churches, fundraising for building construction, and organizing educational and youth activities.³⁷⁴ Dr. Speller's parents, Bud and Nicula, helped organized the Christian Liberty Baptist Association. He remembered that they were living in the woods at that time, and it was the first time he saw his mother ride a horse. "Mother rode a blade-faced mare named Maude, sidesaddle, cause when there was something going on in the church or Sunday school she was going to be there. And we put mother on Maude sidesaddle and she rode Maude out of those woods to the meeting of the Christian Liberty District Association."³⁷⁵

COMMUNITY IN THE BALL FIELDS AND JUKE JOINTS

Other social activities that brought people together were baseball and the nightlife at pool halls and juke joints. Baseball games across the Bootheel were both organized and spontaneous. In the 1920s, most towns had an official team, and local communities frequently reported the

³⁷³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 25-26.

³⁷⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Alberta D. and David O. Shipley, *The History of Black Baptists in Missouri* (n.p., 1976), 34-60.

³⁷⁵ Eugene Speller, interview with Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012.

results of their games to the *Chicago Defender*. In 1926, for example, the New Madrid Giants, “1925 champions of Southeast Missouri,” defeated the Deering Royal Giants.³⁷⁶ Deering was a company town of the Wisconsin Lumber Company, located in Pemiscot County, forty miles from New Madrid.³⁷⁷ This was a significant distance to travel, considering that most Black laborers and sharecroppers did not own a car. The teams’ willingness to travel long distances to play baseball suggests the team members took pride in representing their particular towns.

L. H. Brown, from New Madrid, remembered games being more local, with the players coming from a twelve to fourteen mile radius. The location of the games and the players varied from week to week. “Someone with a truck would come up on Russell Street in front of one of the restaurants or cafes...waiting for fellows to make it to the rendezvous point and proceed to wherever the ball game was going to be that Sunday.” They went to “some field that had been carved out” and drank beer and cokes, and ate hot dogs. They also played donkey baseball, where the hitter did not run the bases, but instead got on a donkey and rode the bases.³⁷⁸

Baseball was also an important source of recreation on plantations and in other rural spaces that did not have the amenities of town. Ted Pullen, who grew up in rural Stoddard County, remembered that “town was a long ways away.” He played baseball in a diamond across from a Black-owned café. Jim Coleman, a man who worked for his father (a landowner and minister), showed him how to play. The players were all ages, and they assembled after church on Sunday. Pullen’s father and uncle were Pentecostal preachers, but his father told him he could attend any church he wanted to, as long he went somewhere. He usually went to play ball

³⁷⁶ “Madrid Giants Winners,” *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1926.

³⁷⁷ Wade, *Deering Plantation*, 1-13, 27-30, 36-37, 46-50, 72.

³⁷⁸ L. H. Brown, interview by Heidi Dodson, May 22, 2006.

after attending the Methodist service. His uncle, in contrast to his father, did not allow his cousins to play ball.³⁷⁹

Historian William P. Jones, in his study of Black lumber workers, shows that leisure spaces, like barrelhouses, were built by white employers to attract male workers, and that baseball fields were later used as a form of welfare capitalism that appealed to year-round workers with families. Baseball was seen by employers as a “method for teaching discipline and teamwork to industrial workers.”³⁸⁰ He argues, however, that even though whites shaped Black leisure activities, Black working-class families used activities like baseball to geographically expand social networks.³⁸¹ The use of organizational recreation by employers to instill discipline, or attract workers, may have been a factor in the Bootheel, particularly in a company town like Deering, or on a plantation. Yet, Black baseball in the Bootheel appears to have been primarily initiated and organized by Black communities, not employers.

With the migration of the 1920s, the number of African American juke joints, taverns, and café’s proliferated in towns and in the country. In some cases, Blacks and whites frequented the same venue, causing outrage by prominent whites. In 1925, *Sikeston Standard* editor Charles L. Blanton complained about two night spots, a “negro joint” and a “Honk-a-Tonk,” located west and south of town where whites and blacks were socializing together. Blanton warned that “the negroes should be removed from the neighborhood before a hangin takes place or the enraged

³⁷⁹ Ted Pullen, interview by Heidi Dodson, Bell City, MO, July 6, 2012, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

³⁸⁰ Jones, *Black Ulysses*, 60-78.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

neighbors pull the house down.” Castigating the attendees, he lamented: “Just imagine the class of whites who attend these negro frolics.”³⁸²

Jones described a similar blurring of the color line in lumber towns where swing music attracted Blacks and whites. Whites watched Black performances, but interracial dancing was taboo and “provoked police to ‘come in there and close it down, run everybody out of there and bust some heads.’” In the case of the rural Sikeston gatherings in the Bootheel, the County Sheriff broke them up without violence, but Charles L. Blanton’s lynching threat portended the possible consequences if such parties continued.

Such interracial socializing posed a threat to the social order, not just because of fears of intimacy between Black men and white women, but because of fears that Black and white workers might join in common cause against the oppression of landowners. As Chapter One described, in the 1910s, virulent racism divided Black and white workers, even though the Socialist Party had a strong presence in the region. In the 1920s, African Americans migrated to rural areas that had previously been all-white, and in some cases, worked side-by-side in the fields with whites. The expansion of Black leisure spaces attracted some working-class whites, and led to more social interaction between the two groups, perhaps hinting at the possibilities of interracial cooperation during the next decade.³⁸³

When African American families like the Burnetts, Currins, and Pernermons left Mississippi and Tennessee during the 1920s, leaving behind family and friends, they hoped to find something better in the Border South state of Missouri. For many, land ownership represented the pinnacle of their aspirations. What they found was a region transitioning to the

³⁸² “Harry Oberson, 29, Severely Burned,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, January 20, 1925.

³⁸³ Jones, *Black Ulysses*, 82-83; “Harry Oberson, 29, Severely Burned,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, January 20, 1925.

large-scale cotton agriculture they had left behind, with few opportunities for ownership. Still, the rich fertile soil of newly drained river valleys and swamps produced rich yields of cotton, allowing many sharecroppers to come out slightly ahead at the end of the year. Jim Crow was pervasive, but Black farmers had more autonomy when it came to farming decisions, in part because new plantation owners in the Bootheel, many from the Midwest, knew little about cotton production.

As the depression deepened, economic stability dwindled, and white sharecroppers became more resentful of African Americans' presence in what they perceived as "white man's country." By this time, however, African American migrants had spent nearly a decade building churches, schools, lodges, and businesses, and had established regional social networks through religious organizations, leisure activities, and the UNIA. Despite rapidly deteriorating agricultural conditions, and growing white resentment of Black farmers, African Americans did not give up on land ownership, or a sustainable agrarian life. As the next chapter shows, the possibilities of the New Deal presented a new ray of hope, and African Americans tried a range of collective strategies to achieve their vision of democratic agrarianism. These strategies revealed different philosophies within African American communities regarding the best path to economic independence and citizenship.

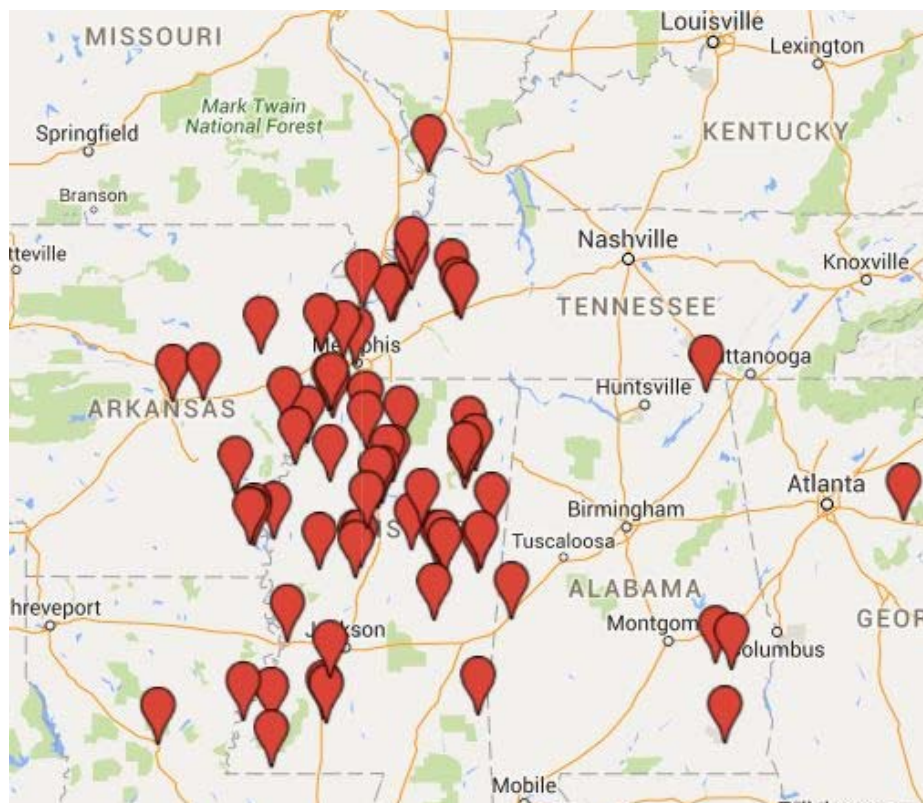
Chapter 3 Figures

Figure 17. Cutover land in the Little River Drainage District, ca. 1910s.



Source: Little River Drainage District Collection, courtesy of the Missouri State Archives.

Figure 18. This map shows the place of birth for African Americans migrants to the Missouri Bootheel.



Source: Birth place data were taken from death certificates and obituaries.

Figure 19. Photo of Joe Bankhead at his home in Charleston, Missouri.



Source: Photo by author, June 22, 2012, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

Figure 20. Photo of Mozetta Hull Henry at her home in Homestown, Missouri.



Source: Photo by author, October 28, 2013.

Figure 21. Prayer of Deliverance, Church of God in Christ, New Madrid, Missouri, 2006.



Source: Photo by author, 2006.

CHAPTER 4

AFRICAN AMERICAN AGRARIAN POLITICS, LAND OWNERSHIP,
AND THE NEW DEAL

During the 1930s, African Americans in the Bootheel implemented a range of collective strategies in their pursuit of land ownership and economic independence. Some of the organizations they joined and created, such as the National Federation of Colored Farmers (NFCF) and the New Madrid County Colored Subsistence Homestead Corporation, sought their fair share of financial assistance from federal New Deal government programs through political alliances and formal complaints. Others, such as the Christian Era Association, looked inward to membership for financial resources, and obtained loans locally. All of these organizations, to some extent, retained racially separatist traditions of self-help that were held by UNIA members in the 1920s, traditions that also had deep roots in nineteenth-century organizations. As historian Mary Rolinson argues, “many rural southern African Americans through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, persisted in the separatist mindset represented later by the Black Power movement and the Nation of Islam.”³⁸⁴

The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, in contrast, was interracial and acted collectively to pressure the government, strike, and protest for economic, social, and political rights for all workers. In particular, the STFU sought the abolishment of the sharecropping system, reformation of government policies, fair wages, land to produce crops, and better working conditions.³⁸⁵ The range of agrarian organizations formed in the Bootheel reflected African Americans’ ideological differences regarding the best strategy for obtaining socioeconomic

³⁸⁴ Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism*, 23.

³⁸⁵ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 95-96, 103, 105; Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

autonomy. As this chapter shows, however, individuals were also pragmatic, and they acted with a significant degree of flexibility and adaptability by joining different organizations over the course of the decade.

This chapter argues that in the 1930s, African Americans in the Bootheel adopted a more collective, organizationally based approach to landownership compared to the 1920s. This organizational strategy reflected Black rural planning traditions that have been overlooked by most historians, who have focused on bureaucratic government planning or the emergence of the white-dominated field of professional planning.³⁸⁶ African Americans' embrace of planning through organization reflected a cooperative ethos that they had long recognized as essential to survival in a white supremacist society, and had been realized through mutual aid societies, the Colored Farmers' Alliance, the founding of all-Black towns, and other efforts.³⁸⁷

African Americans' use of collective and cooperative planning was also a response to the region's Border South characteristics. African Americans were a minority of the population, and acting as a group harnessed more social and economic power than on an individual basis. In Scott and Stoddard Counties, African Americans comprised only 6 percent of the population in 1930, and in Dunklin County, they were less than 2 percent.³⁸⁸ Collective action became more

³⁸⁶ For works that provide an understanding of planning that is not white-centric, see Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested*, 4; Leonie Sandercock, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2; Connerly, "The Most Segregated City in America."; Nieves and Alexander, "We Shall Independent Be," 3; Brown and Kimball, "Black Richmond," 296-346; Lipsitz "The Racialization of Space," 10-23; Angel David Nieves, "'With them the Pen Must be Mightier than the Sword': Writing, Engendering, and Racializing Planning History," *Journal of Planning History* 1, no. 3 (August 2002): 215-219.

³⁸⁷ Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 173; Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*.

³⁸⁸ 1930 U. S. Census, Population, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>; Collective and cooperate are often used interchangeably. In this chapter, I am using "collective," to refer to planning through a formally or informally constituted group. I am using "cooperative" in two ways. It refers to an ethos, or group value, that emphasizes cooperation between individuals, perhaps in pursuit of a goal. In some contexts it also refers to an economic

urgent in the depths of the depression, when resources were scarce and there was a resurgence of white violence against Black farmers in the Bootheel. Living in Black enclaves, or towns, provided a sense of safety. There was a pragmatic component, as well, which is that during the New Deal, federal government was experimenting with cooperative endeavors, and African Americans thought collectively organizing would increase their chances of getting federal aid.³⁸⁹ The proliferation of organizations involved in agrarian interests during this period demonstrates the growing involvement of a small Black professional middle class in local and state politics, but also the growth of grassroots Black politics among tenant farmers.

This chapter looks at the evolution of organizations that African Americans joined as a vehicle for obtaining land and a stable agrarian life. In order to illuminate the growth of Black grassroots politics, this chapter first examines white fears about Black migration into the region during the Depression, which were tied to economic competition and voting power. Although most African Americans in the Bootheel voted Republican, a small but growing contingent of Black professionals joined state Democratic organizations and pressed the federal government for New Deal benefits that would help Black farmers. Next, the chapter looks at the manifestation of some of these efforts in the form of a Missouri Farms Homestead proposal, local activities of the National Federal of Colored Farmers (NFCF), the fight for a federal cooperative resettlement program for African Americans, and the creation of the New Madrid County Colored Subsistence Homestead Association.

cooperative, such as a farm project, is managed and owned by members of the group. In some cases, farm projects incorporated cooperative and individual components. For example, at the federal La Forge Farms project discussed later in the chapter, families managed their own individual farms, but they collectively owned equipment, the cotton gin, and other community resources.

³⁸⁹ Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959); Sydney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

Many sharecroppers also joined the STFU, which sought federal assistance, but used more confrontational methods to achieve these ends. The organization also posed a potent threat to white landowners because Black and white members worked together. Not all African Americans supported the public protests and strikes of the STFU, and this chapter looks at class and ideological divisions that existed in the region. Finally, this chapter looks at the establishment of Pinhook, a Black farm-owning community established by the Christian Era Association, a group of about fifty Black families that collectively purchased a large tract of land. The Christian Era Association was connected to the Christian Liberty Baptist Association, which since the early 1930s was concerned about Black economic development in the region.

Violence against Black Farmers, 1930-1933

The dire economic circumstances of the Depression, an increase in white violence, and the possibilities of the New Deal politicized rural African Americans in the Bootheel. The Depression hit the Bootheel hard, but farmers did not experience the worst effects until 1930. In 1929, crop prospects were “favorable,” and farmers predicted “corn is king and cotton queen this year.”³⁹⁰ The overproduction of cotton in the South, however, caused prices to decrease. In early 1930, extension agents told farmers to reduce their cotton production, and to plant alternative crops like alfalfa and sweet corn. Few listened, and by the fall of 1930, citing low

³⁹⁰ “Crop Prospects Most Favorable in Recent Years,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), July 25, 1929.

market prices for cotton, landowners reduced wages for cotton picking from \$1.00 per hundred pounds to fifty cents per hundred.³⁹¹

Economic conditions in cities were desperate as well, and there was a reverse migration of Black and white families moving back to the land, in the hopes that they could at least produce enough food to feed their families. The drought of 1930 and 1931, which affected southern states in the Ohio and Lower Mississippi Valley, foreclosed this option for many, especially tenant farmers. The Bootheel was not as devastated by drought as the Arkansas Delta, however, and many farmers from that state moved up to Missouri seeking land and work.³⁹²

The combination of economic depression and migration into the Bootheel caused some whites to view African Americans as economic competition, and interlopers in an agricultural frontier forged by whites. In the fall of 1930, an article in the *Steele Enterprise*, of Pemiscot County, reported that some white farmers had agreed to only hire white labor. The author praised the fact that “at last the native Pemiscovian is awakened to the fact that the land of his father – the great alluvial valley of Pemiscot County – is slowly, but surely being taken over by the negro race.” This was deemed unacceptable because “there are hundreds of good white farmers, forced from their homes in adjoining states by the most disastrous drouth in the history of the county, that are anxious to locate in Pemiscot County.”³⁹³

³⁹¹ “Need Cotton Pickers,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), November 14, 1929; “Farmers Urged to Plant 100 Acres Sweet Corn,” “Farmers Becoming Interested in Alfalfa,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), March 21, 1930; “Cotton Pickers Get 50 Cents Per Hundred,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), August 22, 1930.

³⁹² Mark Fannin, *Labor’s Promised Land: Radical Visions of Gender, Race, and Religion in the South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 87-88; Nan E. Woodruff, “The Failure of Relief during the Arkansas Drought of 1930-1931,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 301-03.

³⁹³ “Movement Started to Use White Cotton Pickers Instead of Negroes,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), August 29, 1930 [reprinted from the *Steele Enterprise*].

Violence erupted in January 1931, when whites threatened Black farmers in the Gray Ridge area of Stoddard County and burned a school. In the Wardell area of Pemiscot County the following month, whites dynamited two houses and a car. Thirteen men were arrested, but their charges were dismissed. African Americans in Hayti and the surrounding area were warned to leave. The *Missouri Herald* denounced the violence as un-American, and argued that while work was not plentiful, there was enough for everyone to get by. An editorial in the *Sikeston Standard* also protested the violence in Stoddard County, and said the Black farmers should get a “square deal.”³⁹⁴ Still, Black displacement remained a recurring problem throughout the region. In 1932, the *Negro World*, a UNIA publication, reported that “Conditions regarding the Negroes at Bragg City [Pemiscot County] are beyond explanation. Since the first of February forty-two families have moved out, some of whom were dispossessed.”³⁹⁵ In 1933, Charles M. Barnes, a white businessman in Marston, New Madrid County, wrote in his diary that Joe Hill and other Black farmers were “disturbed” because whites were “interfering with their plans” by occupying all the available houses on a particular tract of land, even though they did not appear to be farming any of the land.³⁹⁶

Anti-Black sentiment in the Bootheel was a response to fear of economic competition, but also to growing Black political activity. During the early twentieth century, most African Americans in the Bootheel voted for the Republican Party, a practice that dated to Reconstruction, when the party was more supportive of Black citizenship rights than

³⁹⁴ Editorial, *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, January 16, 1931; “White Demand Farm Hands Discharge,” *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1931; Arrests of White Marauders Halt Exodus of Negroes,” *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), February 14, 1931; Editorial, *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), February 27, 1931.

³⁹⁵ “Bragg City, MO,” *Negro World*, March 12, 1932.

³⁹⁶ Diary entry, Charles M. Barnes, January 20, 1933, diary series, 1928-1933, f. 31-33, Charles Merlin Barnes Papers, SHSMO-CO.

Democrats.³⁹⁷ The Democratic Party dominated politics in the Bootheel, but the Republican Party gained traction in the 1920s, creating a tense political atmosphere. Black migration from the South in the 1920s, coupled with an increase in white Republican voters moving to the Bootheel from the Midwest, gave African Americans more power to influence elections.³⁹⁸

The 1928 election year was particularly fraught, with political observers predicting that the Black vote in the urban areas, and in the Bootheel, could sway elections in one direction or another. When both political parties met in Jefferson City that year for their conventions, they both included promises in their platforms “designed to catch the colored vote.” The Republican Party, appealing to Bootheel African Americans, stood on record as supporting the establishment of an agricultural vocational school in the region. The effort to get this school was spearheaded by African American Baptist minister Rev. S. D. Woods of Sikeston, and vocational agriculture teacher L. B. Boler, who worked at Lincoln High School in Charleston.³⁹⁹ Unfortunately, the state never appropriated funding for the school, despite decades of effort.

Democrats in urban areas like St. Louis were appealing to Black voters, but in the rural Bootheel, most Democrats responded with violence and intimidation, cracking down on what they perceived as an epidemic of illegal Black voting. In November 1928, Black Republicans held a political rally at the African American New Foundland Methodist Church in Concord, in

³⁹⁷ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 83.

³⁹⁸ Alex Cooper, interviewed by Heidi Dodson, October 25, 2012; Sam. B. Cook, comp., *Official Manual of the State of Missouri for the years 1901-1902* (Jefferson City, MO: Tribune Printing Company, 1901). Presidential election data from the *Official Manual* was also consulted for the following years: 1905-1906, 1909-1910, 1913-1914, 1917-1918, 1921-1922, 1925-1926, 1929-1930. This shift began in 1920, in terms of the presidential election. Up to that point, no county in the Bootheel had voted a majority for a Republican presidential candidate, in the twentieth century (although Republicans had held local offices), but in 1920, Stoddard, Scott, New Madrid, and Pemiscot went for Warren G. Harding. In 1924, Pemiscot County again voted a majority for the Republican candidate, although the other counties went Democratic again. In 1928, the pendulum swung back to the Republicans in Stoddard, Pemiscot, and New Madrid Counties, which went for Herbert Hoover.

³⁹⁹ "Both Missouri Parties Seek Race Voters," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept 22, 1928.

Pemiscot County, and they invited Black St. Louis Republican Walter Lathen to speak. The rally occurred without a hitch, but that night someone fired shots into Lathen's room, missing him. The church where he spoke was burned to the ground. The Republican State Committee sent the church \$1,500 in order to help them rebuild. According to Alex Cooper, who grew up in Pemiscot County, the burning and rebuilding of the church "became a subject for common discussion among Blacks throughout the region." Such discussions probably further politicized African Americans and contributed to their skepticism about the Democratic Party.⁴⁰⁰

In predominately Black rural communities of tenant farmers, voters organized in their own interest, risking economic retribution. In August 1930, the editor of the *Missouri Herald* railed against white Republicans' practice of visiting Black churches and schools to give speeches and ask for votes. In the rural community of Conran, in New Madrid County, white businessman Charles M. Barnes, along with Virgil Baldwin and J. L. Parrett, visited Shelby Church to speak with African Americans about voting. Two years later, Barnes went to Catron to "attend a negro barbecue and meet the negro voters of that locality," and returned to Shelby school, where he and several Republican candidates spoke, distributed election literature, and encouraged African Americans to turn out and vote.⁴⁰¹

At these events, both Black and white leaders gave speeches. In 1930, at a meeting at Bragg City, Pemiscot County, an African American tenant farmer, Henry Singleton, rose to speak, and jokingly said "I am not a candidate for office." The mere suggestion of Black political

⁴⁰⁰ "Republicans Will Rebuild Fire-Swept Negro Church," *New York Times*, November 11, 1928; Alex A. Cooper, Sr., "The Role of the Church," *An Anecdotal History* (Hayti, MO: 2006), 32. This Republican speaker may have been Walter S. Lathen Sr. In 1920 he was a stock keeper at City Hall in St. Louis. See Ancestry.com, 1920 *U. S. Federal Census*, Walter Lathen, St. Louis Ward 23, St. Louis (Independent City), MO, p. 17B.

⁴⁰¹ Diary entries, Charles M. Barnes, November 1, 1930; July 19, 1932; October 26, 1932, diary series, 1928-1933, f. 31-33, Charles Merlin Barnes Papers, SHSMO-CO.

candidacy alarmed the newspaper editor in Hayti, who had “heard on several occasions that some of the negro leaders had remarked that they expected to be candidates at some future time.” The editor claimed that “Henry Singleton has about as much chance to be elected in this county as a polecat to sprout wings and fly,” and he hoped the Democratic Party would never stoop so low as to go into Black churches and schools.⁴⁰² The idea that white Democrats could work with African Americans was anathema to the editor, and it reflected the attitude held by many white rural Democrats in Missouri. Henry Singleton continued his political activism, and in 1932, he was referred to as the “‘leader’ of a large number of disgruntled negroes in this territory.”⁴⁰³

A Black Middle-Class Agrarian Agenda and the Missouri Homestead Proposal

While Black sharecroppers engaged strategically in politics, usually on the side of the Republican Party, the promise of Roosevelt’s New Deal convinced some members of a small Black professional class in the Bootheel, to join the Democratic Party by 1933. This small contingent, with members from the larger towns in the Bootheel, was part of a larger regional and state network of Black Democrats that had emerged in recent years. In August 1933, the Negro Democratic Cooperative Club of Sikeston planned a statewide meeting, that included speakers such as John T. Clark of the Urban League of St. Louis, African American attorney David E. Grant of St. Louis, and Joseph B. Shannon, a white congressman from Kansas City. Local organizers of this meeting, and of one the following year, included Rev. S. D. Woods,

⁴⁰² Editorial “A Bad Example for Republicanism,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, Mo), August 1, 1930.

⁴⁰³ “Alleged Negro ‘Leader’ Jailed; Felony Charge,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), April 30, 1932.

pastor of the Second Baptist (St. John Missionary) Church in Sikeston, Rev. Isaac Hooker and Rev. J. T. Mitchell of New Madrid, Arthur Foster of Caruthersville, Rev. Ed D. Moore, a Baptist minister in Caruthersville, and G. W. Eulinberg of Charleston.⁴⁰⁴ Many of these men had some high school or college education, which distinguished them from most African Americans in the region.

This political forum allowed rural African Americans in the Bootheel, who had no locally elected Black politicians representing them, to convey their issues to a wider audience. In February 1934, African American employees at the State Capitol in Jefferson City formed the Out-State Negro Democratic Club. Several Bootheel Black Democrats joined, including Arthur Foster, Rev. Woods, and Rev. Hooker. A little more than a week later, the Out-State organization, Jeffersonian Democratic Co-operative League, and the Missouri State Democratic Association, combined as the United Negro Democrats of Missouri and presented issues to the state House of Representatives.⁴⁰⁵

Rev. Woods, Arthur Foster, and other Black professionals involved in Democratic politics in the Bootheel, saw themselves as leaders in advocating an agrarian agenda that would benefit Black tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and laborers, the occupation of most African Americans in the region. Rev. Woods and others had enough education to enter the professional class, and lived in large towns, but most had rural roots and earlier farming experience. Moreover, the Bootheel was economically dependent on agriculture, not industry, and anyone who had leadership aspirations had to deal with this reality.

⁴⁰⁴ "Missouri 'Dems' to Hold Meet. Elaborate Program Planned, Political Leaders to Discuss Vital Issues," *Plain Dealer* (Kansas City, KS), August 18, 1933; "Shannon Will Speak at Fall Negro Confab," *Sikeston* (MO *Standard*), August 18, 1933.

⁴⁰⁵ "Negroes Organize State Democratic Club," *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), February 2, 1934; "Club Meets," *Post-Tribune* (Jefferson City), February 18, 1934.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the speakers for the 1933 Democratic meeting in Sikeston, Rev. B. F. Abbott of Union Memorial M. E. Church in St. Louis, was to give a talk titled “Back to the Farm.” These leaders saw farming as a path of opportunity, if African Americans could obtain a share of New Deal resources and had opportunities for vocational education. They were part of a long lineage of African Americans, dating back to Reconstruction that had at different times advocated returning to the land, or staying on the land. In many cases, this rhetoric advised African Americans to remain in the rural South, but in the nineteenth century, leaders such as Martin Delaney and Edward Blyden had urged African Americans to reclaim land in Africa through colonization.⁴⁰⁶

The statewide organization of Black Democrats, and the realities of the Depression, led to rural-urban collaborations. In late March 1934, possibly as an outcome of the “Back to the Farm Discussion” the previous year, the Urban League of St. Louis supported a proposal to build Missouri Farm Homesteads on 3,000 acres in Stoddard County. The Depression had taken away many urban job opportunities, and in St. Louis, in 1933, the unemployment rate for African Americans was 70 percent.⁴⁰⁷ The Urban League supported the idea of African Americans moving back to rural areas, where they might be able to eke out a subsistence living. The main organizer of the project was Fred A. Jones, a Black St. Louis realtor who worked with two engineers associated with the St. Louis Colored Vocational School, and two architects.

Despite its urban origins, the project probably had local connections in the Bootheel. John T. Clark, head of the Urban League of St. Louis, had spoken at the 1933 meeting hosted by

⁴⁰⁶ “Missouri ‘Dems’ to Hold Meet. Elaborate Program Planned, Political Leaders to Discuss Vital Issues,” *Plain Dealer* (Kansas City, KS), August 18, 1933; Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 77-87.

⁴⁰⁷ Floyd Collins, “Ask Million for Missouri Farm Project,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 26, 1934; Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 23.

the Sikeston Negro Democratic Club, and ideas for such a project may have been discussed at that time. The homestead was to be located east of Essex, where a significant number of African Americans had settled in the migration of the 1920s. Essex and nearby Dexter were also the locations of two UNIA chapter in the 1920s, and thus there was undoubtedly support among local Blacks for establishing an all-Black farm subsistence community. The project also had the support of the Central Executive Council of the Unemployed Citizens League, and the Missouri State Conference of the Emergency Action Councils (EAC), formed by the Urban League to ensure that African Americans knew about New Deal programs and received their fair share of benefits.⁴⁰⁸

The proposal is significant because it points to efforts by African Americans in a variety of organizations to use federal resources implement their own rural planning visions. In order to finance the project, Jones and his associates applied to the federal Subsistence Homestead Division, part of the Department of the Interior, for a \$1-million loan. The Subsistence Homestead Division had been formed in 1933 as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act. A “back to the land” ethic, enthusiastically supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, underpinned this federal experimental land and community planning endeavor. The Missouri Farm Homesteads was going to be a non-profit, cooperative enterprise, with the farmers as shareholders in the corporation. The architects of the plan anticipated it would support about 300 families, which meant that each family would have about ten acres. The small acreage indicates

⁴⁰⁸ Floyd Collins, “Ask Million for Missouri Farm Project,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 26, 1934; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 62; The homestead project was going to be located near a Black community called Huntersville. I have not yet discovered any other references to this place as a Black community, but it is listed as a small settlement named for landowner Stephen B. Hunter. See “Huntersville,” Stoddard County Place Names, 1928-1945, The State Historical Society of Missouri, http://shs.umsystem.edu/manuscripts/ramsay/ramsay_stoddard.html. The source for the online place names data is Mayme L. Hamlett, “Place Names of Six Southeast Counties of Missouri,” (master’s thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1938).

this was not a regular farming operation, but rather a subsistence plan. It was similar, then, to other subsistence homestead projects in the country, which re-settled underemployed urban workers, or stranded rural industrial workers, on small acreages where they could grow enough food to feed their families.⁴⁰⁹ This subsistence, however, would have to be supplemented with other wage work.

The federal government denied the application for Missouri Farm Homesteads, despite the fact that the planning included “government representatives.”⁴¹⁰ The denial of the project application would not be the last time the government failed to respond to Black-initiated rural community-building efforts, as will be shown later in this chapter. It is unknown exactly why the project was refused. It may have been due to limited funding. Another inhibiting factor was likely that there were no cities of substantial size in this rural area, and the only way residents could have supported themselves was through farm labor. Although “stranded farm populations” were initially considered eligible for subsistence projects, by mid-1934 the idea of full-time farming projects had been taken off the table.⁴¹¹ Local white antipathy is another possibility. The population of Stoddard County was 94 percent white, and prior to the migration of the 1920s it had been 99.9 percent white. In the early 1930s, the number of farmers who wanted to buy, rent, or sharecrop land exceeded the available acreage, which facilitated some of the racial violence in Stoddard and Pemiscot Counties mentioned earlier. In Pemiscot County, the mayors

⁴⁰⁹ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 68-76.

⁴¹⁰ Floyd Collins, “Ask Million for Missouri Farm Project,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 26, 1934.

⁴¹¹ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 72-72.

of Caruthersville, Steele, and Hayti warned people moving up from other southern states, who “have poured into the area in recent years,” to stay away.⁴¹²

The National Federation of Colored Farmers

At the same time Black urban leaders put forth the proposal for the Missouri Farm Homestead, another organization took root in the Bootheel, to help African Americans purchase land. Two other members of the emerging Black middle class, Lonnie B. Boler and Marshall Currin, were involved in the National Federation of Colored Farmers (NFCF). In 1934, Boler, who was the agriculture instructor at Lincoln High School, became general manager of the Charleston unit, and Currin, who owned a dance hall and the Creole Café with his wife Sadie, was president. One of the earliest NFCF units had not been established by middle-class leaders, however, but was formed in 1932 by 200 farmers in the vicinity of Parma, New Madrid County, Missouri. Parma had been the home of a UNIA division in the 1920s.⁴¹³

The NFCF was founded in Chicago in 1922 by James P. Davis, Gilchrist Stewart, Cornelius R. Richardson, and Leon R. Harris.⁴¹⁴ The impetus for creating the organization was to assist Black farmers by facilitating land ownership, the cooperative marketing of farm products, and the formation of agricultural credit associations. Most of the organization’s activity in the 1920s was centered in the Midwest, but by 1929 it began to significantly expand in

⁴¹² 1930 *U. S. Federal Census*, Population, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>; “Drouth Refugees Warned to Stay Out of Pemiscot,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), December 21, 1934.

⁴¹³ “The Farmers’ Column,” *Chicago Defender*, February 27, 1932; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 62.

⁴¹⁴ Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 173; “Farmers’ Sunday Planned April 29,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 7, 1934.

the South. A prime motivation for incorporation, and a partial explanation for the NFCF's expansion, was a desire to take advantage of benefits of the 1929 Agricultural Marketing Act, which included the creation of the Federal Farm Board. This was President Hoover's response to the agricultural depression and drop in commodity prices, as a result of overproduction and international competition. The Farm Board was granted \$500 million dollars to provide loans to farmers so they could form cooperatives and more efficiently manage the marketing of their crops. The aid was only distributed to organizations, however, because Hoover was against providing farm subsidies directly to farmers. Black farmers did not have a collective voice in white-dominated agricultural organizations like the American Farm Bureau, or in newly formed cooperatives like the Mid-South Cotton Association. They were often denied access to local agricultural forums, which made it difficult to learn about federal policy and how to access federal aid. The NFCF was incorporated to fill this role serving as the voice of Black agrarian interests.⁴¹⁵

During the mid-1930s, the Charleston unit of the NFCF put its energy behind pressuring politicians to give Black farmers their share of New Deal benefits, and negotiating land purchases for its members. During its early years, the national NFCF largely kept out of politics, and advocated racial separatism, like rural UNIA divisions in the 1920s; but as the Depression

⁴¹⁵ Roll, "The Lazarus of American Farmers': The Politics of Black Agrarianism in the Jim Crow South, 1921-1938," in *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction* eds. Debra A. Reid and Evan P. Bennett (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 139-143; Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, "Herbert Hoover: Domestic Affairs," <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/hover-domestic-affairs>; "Black Men Farmers Hold 'Big Meeting' in Mound Bayou," *Wyandotte Echo* (Kansas City, KS), August 28, 1931; "Mississippi Paper Terrorizes Negro Farmers," *Negro Star* (Wichita, KS), April 3, 1931; "Mississippi Paper Threatens Negroes Who Join Farm Organization," *Wyandotte Echo* (Kansas City, KS), March 6, 1931 "Farmers 'Waking Up,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 6, 1929; "Suggests Appointment of Federal Farm Organizer," *Wyandotte Echo* (Kansas City, KS), January 16, 1931; "Cotton Market Plans Explained at New Madrid," *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, April 11, 1930; "Governors Appoint Delegates to Nat'l Farmers Conference," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1931.

wore on, the stance of the organization changed. In 1933, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was designed to increase the price of commodities, such as cotton, by subsidizing farmers to take land out of production. The NFCF supported this legislation, but in its implementation, the benefits went primarily to large white landowners. This legislation, and other New Deal initiatives, pushed Black farmers to politically engage with agrarian politics.

In October 1934, at the national NFCF meeting held in Charleston, Missouri, members discussed whether the New Deal “has been a curse or blessing to Race farmers.”⁴¹⁶ L. B. Boler chaired the conference, which was held at Lincoln High School and attended by thousands of Black farmers across the county. The ensuing discussions led to a list of demands, which included an end to sharecropping and “at least one model Race farm community in each southern and border state.” They recognized the critical need for representation on local government committees that determined cotton allocations and subsidies, and processed loan applications. They suggested the AAA create committees of “two Race farm owners and three sharecroppers or tenant farmers in each county having an appreciable Race farm population.”⁴¹⁷

Henry A. Hunt, an African American official in the Farm Credit Administration, was present to hear these demands. Nathaniel C. Bruce was also in attendance. Bruce was a state leader in Black education, serving as the State Inspector for Negro Schools in the 1920s. He was also the founder of the Dalton Vocational School in Chariton County, which he referred to as the “Tuskegee of the Midwest.” Bruce had been a student of Booker T. Washington’s at the Tuskegee Institute, and believed that vocational education was the best route to economic

⁴¹⁶ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 76-77, 93-94, 116-117; “New Deal Will Get Real Hearing at Farmers’ Meet,” *Chicago Defender*, October 20, 1934; Roll, “Lazarus,” 144-145.

⁴¹⁷ “Farmers Close Best Confab in Charleston, MO,” *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1934; Roll, “Lazarus,” 145-146.

independence. Bruce and L. B. Boler, the agricultural instructor at Lincoln School in Charleston, had known each other as far back as 1928, when they planned a Tri-County Negro Fair and Agricultural Institute in Charleston.⁴¹⁸

The challenges that Black farmers faced on a local level in trying to obtain loans are starkly revealed by the experience of Henry Alexander, an NFCF member in Charleston and a former UNIA member.⁴¹⁹ In November 1935, he complained to the Resettlement Administration (RA) about his trouble getting an FHA loan. The Resettlement Administration was formed in 1935, and part of its program was to resettle destitute farmers, rural laborers, and urban workers into planned government communities.⁴²⁰ Alexander explained that the previous spring, heavy rain had led to crop losses. In order to save his farm, which was “a nice piece of property, well situated,” Alexander had to mortgage his house in Charleston. Alexander’s farm, which he either rented or owned, was located in the Bird’s Point-New Madrid Floodway in the rural community of Windyville, but his wife lived in town. He was in danger of losing his home, and so he applied for an FHA loan at a local bank but had been turned down. A Resettlement Administration (RA) official responded by forwarding Alexander’s letter to the regional RA director in Champaign, Illinois, and suggested that he try to renew his mortgage locally, which Alexander had already attempted.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁸ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 93-94; “Farmers Close Best Confab in Charleston, MO,” *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1934; Gary R. Kremer, “Nathaniel C. Bruce, Black Education, and the “Tuskegee of the Midwest,” in *Race and Meaning: The African American Experience in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014), 82-83. “Motion Pictures at Negro Fair,” *Sikeston (MO) Standard*, November 30, 1928. The Dalton Vocational School was originally the Bartlett Agricultural and Industrial School.

⁴¹⁹ Henry Alexander’s unmarried daughter, Estella, was a member of the UNIA, so most likely he was as well. “The News and Views of UNIA Divisions, Charleston, MO,” *Negro World*, August 7, 1926.

⁴²⁰ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 91-93.

⁴²¹ H. Alexander to Joe H. B. Evans, November 26, 1935, f. “Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.,” box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

James P. Davis, national head of the NCF, was alerted to the situation. Davis suggested that Alexander talk with Mr. Brown, the local county agent, and the local RA contact, Mr. Anderson. Alexander did so, but as he explained to Davis, when they went to apply for loans, “we negro farmers are Being Slighted and turned away the Door Keeper makes negroes Stand Back and he lets the White Pople in the office We Just cant Hardley get Wated onn One day I was at the office all day and Mr. Peck Rote 40 or fifty Aplications and all was white men except three and the Door Keeper made the negros stand back all that day and told the Colored Pople to go home and make Sheer Crops where they was he also told them that they could not get teames and tools Because it will be to late to make a crop.” Alexander’s experience is illustrative of what Black farmers across the South faced when they tried to seek financial assistance locally. Even if Anderson was a government representative, his ideas about who should receive preference for farming assistance were in line with local racial attitudes. Most whites thought African Americans should be sharecropping, not running their own farms.

Alexander told Davis that the local chapter of the NCF had met at [Marshall] Currin’s Hall earlier that week, and the farmer were trying to “take Curage [sic].” He planned to supplement his income by raising sweet potatoes and other vegetables, and making molasses.⁴²² James P. Davis then reported the discrimination to the AAA cotton division, and drew attention to the political ramifications of the situation. “The Negro vote in southeast Missouri is very heavy, and as reported in a former letter, I have it from reliable sources that Col Knox has a man of my racial group in that section “making a survey,” and I am sure he is there for the purpose of

⁴²² H. Alexander to Jas. P. Davis, January 20, 1936, f. “Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.,” box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP. Correspondence in this series does not reflect who originally alerted James. P. Davis to the situation. In this letter from Henry Alexander to Davis, Alexander refers to a letter Davis wrote him January 11, 1936.

securing data on this discrimination and feature it during the National Negro Congress [NNC] meeting here [Chicago] Feb. 14th. If I am correct in assuming this, then the publicity will in all probability affect the Negro vote in St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and other large centers.”⁴²³

Davis may have been overstating the effect that conditions in rural Missouri would have on Black urban voters, but certainly reports that racial discrimination was nullifying any New Deal benefits for African Americans would have carried weight. Nineteen thirty-six was a presidential election year, and although it ended up being a landslide for Franklin D. Roosevelt some political pundits predicted a close election. In Missouri, most African Americans lived in St. Louis and Kansas City, but the next highest population concentration was in the Bootheel, given the migration of the 1920s. The fact that a rural Black population could influence an election was unusual in the context of the cotton South, where most African Americans were disfranchised. Davis’s letter led to a promise the issue would be investigated, but it is not clear whether this request was carried out.⁴²⁴

While the NCFE encouraged members to protest unfair conditions through letter writing to politicians, and national meetings in Mississippi County, the organization’s greatest effectiveness was in helping farmers purchase land. In 1934, the Charleston NCFE chapter

⁴²³ James. P. Davis to Hon. E. A. Miller, January 23, 1936, f. “Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.,” box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴²⁴ E. A. Miller to C. C. Taylor, January 25, 1936; Joseph L. Dailey to H. Alexander, February 11, 1936, f. “Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.,” box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP. Whether Henry Alexander or his wife received any relief is unclear, for he tragically died of a gunshot wound in May 1936. The inquest into Henry Alexander’s death pointed towards his son, Purvis. Henry Alexander, death certificate no. 20086, May 13, 1936, Missouri Death Certificates, 1910-1964, Missouri Office of the Secretary of State, <http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/deathcertificates/Default.aspx>; Henry Alexander, Coroner Inquest Files, October 1905-October 1932, Mississippi County, Missouri, roll C12089, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri; “Mississippi County Negro Found Shot,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, May 14, 1936.

reported in the *Chicago Defender* that thirty-seven members of the Lincoln Unit, located in Charleston, had purchased farms, raising the total number of Black landowners in the county from nine to forty-six. The NFCF had “found this land for them and secured favorable terms.”⁴²⁵ Land records show that at least nine Black families purchased land in 1934 from the Union Central Life Insurance Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. C. C. and Georgia Cage, who had been members of the UNIA in Arkansas, and then migrated to Missouri, were among these families. The land they purchased was in the Windyville neighborhood, described in Chapter Two.⁴²⁶

The success of the NFCF in helping these farmers find land reveals an important aspect of Black landownership that differentiated the Missouri Bootheel from much of the South. African Americans found more success purchasing land from lumber and insurance companies in the 1930s and 1940s than from white individuals. There is still much we do not know about how African Americans obtained land in the South. Arthur Raper, in his study of Greene County, Georgia, found that most Black farmers purchased land “based on a personal equation.” They needed a white “sponsor” in order to do so, and many purchased from former landlords. Mark Schultz found that in nearby Hancock County, Georgia, interracial kinship ties played a role. Race relations were shaped by a culture of personalism and a surprising amount of interracial interaction in daily life. According to Schulz, and historian Valerie Grim, whites were

⁴²⁵ “Missouri Farmers Gain Tracts during 10 Months,” *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1934.

⁴²⁶ Deeds of Trust, Fred and Rachel Coleman, C. B. and Eliza Richardson, C. R. and Mary Richardson, Earnest and Jessie Washington; Grant and Lula Cobb, Eddie and Mattie Bonner, W. M. and Ollie M. Carson, J. P. and Mary Emanuel, Joe and Ollie Verner, R. S. and Rebecca Howard, index vol. 6, Recorder of Deeds, Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston, MO.

particularly opposed to Black landownership in places like Mississippi, in the Black Belt of the South. In some cases, the federal government facilitated ownership in these areas.⁴²⁷

In the Missouri Bootheel, and in Northeast Arkansas, plantation agriculture developed relatively late, and there was less of a culture of personalism and fewer multi-generational ties between elite whites and African Americans. Whites' hostility and frequent threats to expel Blacks from rural areas meant African Americans often settled in Black enclaves for self-protection and mutual support. Ted Pullen, from a Black farm-owning family in Stoddard County, recalled that there was not much Black and white interaction during his childhood. As Jarod Roll has argued, the separatism of organizations like the NCFE declined from the 1920s to the 1930s, as they shifted from eschewing government involvement to engaging in politics. To a significant degree, however, Black farm families' daily lives remained socially and spatially separate from whites.⁴²⁸

Families who were able to purchase land from insurance and lumber companies, with the help of the NCFE, found their hold on that land precarious. As Henry Alexander's experience demonstrated, one bad crop year could be devastating, particularly if families were not able to obtain supplemental loans for equipment, animals, seed and other expenses. Fred and Rachel Coleman, who purchased land along with her extended family in 1934, appear to have lost their farm. By 1935, the entire extended family was in Charleston, living in an alley residence behind the house of Black grocer Jacob Harris. Charles Jackson, whose father Carl purchased land

⁴²⁷ Schulz, *Rural Face of White Supremacy*, 33-51; Grim, "African American Landlords," 400-01. More research needs to be done on Black government homesteading in states like Arkansas and Mississippi. In the Missouri Bootheel, many African Americans who lived at the federal La Forge Farms Project purchased their farms when the Congress liquidated the project. There were other federal cooperative land-leasing programs in the region, which included African Americans, but it is not known at this time what happened to the land after the programs were liquidated.

⁴²⁸ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*; Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*.

around 1935, held on to it for a few years, but the land was not producing enough to make the mortgage payments; they lost the farm in 1938. After that, Carl farmed for L. B. Boler, the agriculture teacher at Lincoln High School, who had been the general manager of the NFCF.⁴²⁹

There were many reasons Black farmers lost land, but one challenge they faced was making cutover land productive. The soil was extremely rich, but after lumber companies harvested timber, they left the stumps in the ground. These stumps had to be cleared before farming was viable. Maxwell Williams, a farm manager for Missouri State Life Insurance Company, recalled that clearing the stumps made paying off loans difficult. “They used to say that some of this land had to break about three farmers before somebody got it into shape to work.”⁴³⁰

The frustrating experiences of families like the Alexanders, Jacksons, and Colemans may have contributed to the decline of the NFCF, which held its last meeting in 1939. As Jarod Roll points out, the emergence of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, which advocated for laborers and sharecroppers, provided a new alternative. African Americans’ desire for land ownership did not abate, but land availability was becoming an issue, particularly on a collective basis. The fact that the organization, in Mississippi County at least, was able to facilitate land ownership for so many families was remarkable. It was less successful, however in ensuring Black farmers received the loans they needed to stay afloat during difficult economic times. When federal aid was controlled by all-white local banks and committees, such aid often came too late, if at all.

⁴²⁹ Charles Jackson, interview by Heidi Dodson, Wilson City, Missouri, January 23, 2013.

⁴³⁰ Maxwell Williams, interview by Ray Brassieur, March 16, 1994.

The Battle for La Forge Farms

In 1936 the Resettlement Administration placed options on several tracts of land in the Bootheel for separate African American and white cooperative farm projects. Their plans were undoubtedly influenced by the demands of the NFCF and other Black leaders in the state. The Black cooperative project was nearly abandoned because of white opposition in Mississippi County, which revealed the persistence of sundown areas in the Bootheel, and the federal government's tendency to bow to the forces of white supremacy. The intervention of African American John T. Clark of the St. Louis Urban League and Arthur Foster, an African American from Caruthersville involved in state Democratic politics, helped rescue the project.

When the RA placed options on land in 1936, the first choice for the Black project was the "Buckeye" plantation located in western Mississippi County. For white sharecroppers, the RA chose a site about twelve miles south in the La Forge community of New Madrid County. In April 1937, white residents in Mississippi County learned about government plans for the site near Buckeye and embarked on a massive letter-writing and petition campaign against the project. On April 8th an editorial was published in a local newspaper, the Charleston *Enterprise-Courier*. Titled "Let's Nip This in the Bud," it railed against plans to "establish this glorified collectivistic colony of Negroes" which would "add nothing whatever to the wealth and well-being of the community." That same day, letters were written by a representative of the Democratic Central Committee of the county, the Charleston Commercial Club, and plethora of county officials, landowners, and merchants. Most of the letters were written by members of the white professional and merchant class tied to Charleston, the county seat, but hundreds of people

who lived in the western part of the county signed petitions. Notably, 285 people from the Dogwood, Armor, and Bement School Districts argued against the Black farm project.⁴³¹

The justifications for excluding Blacks varied. Some argued that African Americans would cause a rise in crime and a decrease in property values. Attorney J. M. Haw argued that “some years ago there was a great increase in cotton raising in this county and with it an influx of negroes from the southern states. Since then the criminal costs of this county have increased tremendously.” He claimed that crime was less of a problem in the western part of the counties, where African American did not live, and that if the RA proceeded with the project, the agency would be introducing “a foreign and unwanted element into that community.”⁴³² Others argued that Blacks had never been allowed to live in the area and thus it should remain white. S. B. Hardwick, representing the Democratic Central Committee, protested because Long Prairie Township had “always been strongly Democratic in politics and we would like for it to remain that way.”⁴³³ But the number of petitioners who represented themselves as residents of particular school districts is significant. According to Missouri state law, if there were eight African American children of school age in a county, the school district had to provide a separate school. Whites in many rural Missouri counties had historically tried to circumvent this law by undercounting students and violently forcing African Americans residents to leave.⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ S. B. Hardwick to Orville Zimmerman, April 8, 1937; The Charleston Commercial Club to Hon. Bennett Champ Clark, April 8, 1937; Clerk of the Circuit Court, Charleston, Missouri, to Hon. Bennett C. Clark, April 12, 1937; John T. Clark to Hon. Bennett C. Clark, May 4, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴³² J. M. Haw to Bennett C. Clark, April 10, 1937; James Haw to Hon. Bennett C. Clark, April 14, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴³³ S. B. Hardwick to Bennett C. Clark, April 10, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴³⁴ Linda C. Morice and John W. Hunt, “By the Numbers: Minimum Attendance Laws and Inequality of Educational Opportunity in Missouri, 1865-1905,” *American Educational History Journal* 34, no. 2 (January 2007): 275-287;

As white residents' protest letters flooded the offices of state politicians, Resettlement Administration officials decided they probably would not go forward with the project in that location, given the sentiment of local whites. African American leaders in other parts of the state learned of the situation and formulated their own responses. John T. Clark was one of the first to respond. He enclosed a copy of the negative Charleston *Enterprise-Courier* editorial, which suggests that someone from Mississippi County sent it to him. The Urban League had a Federal Projects and Social Legislation Committee with a history of staying apprised of conditions in the Bootheel; one of its concerns was improving conditions in rural areas so migrants would not move to St. Louis, where housing and jobs were in short supply.⁴³⁵

Clark wrote that he represented a large number of African Americans and white friends in St. Louis, and pointed out that "this section of Missouri [Bootheel] is and has been notoriously hostile toward any evidence of progress made by Negroes in that section." He argued that "if the government cannot protect the interests of the weak against the strong, then there is a serious question whether we can ever approach our ideal of a democratic form of government." Like James P. Davis of the NCF and NNC had done in response to the discrimination Henry Alexander faced, Clark reminded federal officials that the treatment of African Americans during the New Deal was a benchmark for the democracy President Roosevelt had espoused. Moreover, African Americans outside the Bootheel were paying attention to how the most vulnerable

Cobb, Robert S. Cobb, comp. Biennial Report of the Missouri Negro Industrial Commission, 1921-1922 (Jefferson City, MO: 1921), 3, 11, 16, 23.

⁴³⁵ "Welfare Work Holds its Own in Two Cities," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 5, 1934; "Ask Million for Missouri Farm Project," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 26, 1934; John T. Clark to Hon. Bennett C. Clark, May 4, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

African Americans in Missouri, and the South, were treated, and they would shape their politics accordingly.⁴³⁶

Still, the RA did not move forward with the project, and by June officials claimed that it was because of funding reductions. They were, however, going ahead with the white resettlement project near La Forge in neighboring New Madrid County.⁴³⁷ There were thirty-five to fifty Black families living on that land who might be displaced. In August 1937, Arthur Foster of the Missouri Negro Survey protested this displacement. The Survey, consisting of nine African American men, had been established by Missouri Governor Lloyd Stark in April of 1936. Its purpose was to study the "economic, industrial, educational, and civic needs of Missouri Negroes."⁴³⁸ Foster was a native of the Bootheel town of Caruthersville and worked at the State Capitol in Jefferson City. He was one of the early members of the United Negro Democratic Club of Missouri, formed in 1934.⁴³⁹ Over the course of several month, he persistently sent letters to President Roosevelt, the director of the Resettlement Administration, the Secretary of Agriculture, and many other key government officials and politicians, asking about progress toward building a Black resettlement project, suggesting that part of the land at

⁴³⁶ John T. Clark to Hon. Bennett C. Clark, May 4, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴³⁷ Memorandum, R. C. Smith to Dr. W. W. Alexander, April 23, 1937; W. W. Alexander to R. C. Smith, May 4, 1937; B. W. Evans to John T. Clark, June 30, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴³⁸ "Missouri Governor Names Commission," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 16, 1937.

⁴³⁹ "Negroes Organize State Democratic Club," *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), February 2, 1934; "Club Meets," *City Post-Tribune* (Jefferson City, MO), February 18, 1934.

La Forge be reserved for African Americans. “What our People need in the Agriculture erra [sic] of Southeast Missouri,” he argued, “is Security and protection.”⁴⁴⁰

Although correspondence does not reveal exactly what caused the government to change course, ultimately the RA followed Foster’s suggestion and took the land it had optioned at La Forge in New Madrid County for the white project and divided it between Black and white sharecroppers. Thus, what had originally been intended as two segregated farm projects separated by twelve miles became one interracial project, although the farms were spatially segregated within the project. As with so many New Deal programs, the federal government was not willing to actively oppose white supremacy, unless pushed to do so by African Americans.⁴⁴¹

The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union

African Americans’ desire for land gained urgency during the 1930s because landowners in the Bootheel, and other parts of the cotton South, had begun to evict sharecroppers from plantations. This shift was prompted largely by the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of 1933 and 1938, which sought to raise the price of cotton by paying farmers to take part of their acreage out of production. This encouraged landowners to evict sharecroppers from plantations and use day laborers during peak cotton picking and chopping seasons. It also allowed them to pocket the entirety of government subsidies they otherwise would have had to

⁴⁴⁰ Arthur Foster to R. C. Smith, July 16, 1937; Arthur Foster to Julian Friant, July 16, 1937; Arthur Foster to Henry A. Wallace, July 31, 1937; Arthur Foster to W. W. Alexander, September 12, 1937; C. B. Baldwin to Arthur Foster, August 24, 1937, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴⁴¹ “Farm Security Administration Southeast Missouri Project, New Madrid County, LaForge, Missouri,” f. “Southeast Missouri Projects-Misc.,” box 411, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

share with tenant farmers. Because housing was often tied to sharecropping arrangements, many farm families found themselves evicted and homeless.²

In 1934, in response to displacement and the oppressive conditions of sharecropping, white workers Clay East and H. L. Mitchell formed the STFU in Tyronza, Arkansas. In subsequent years, the union attracted thousands of members and spread to Missouri, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and other states. One of the first union organizers in Missouri was John Handcox, who arrived in the summer of 1936. Rev. Owen H. Whitfield, an African American sharecropper and Baptist preacher, joined the organization and became one of its best organizers. Owen and his wife Zella were from Mississippi and had moved to Missouri via Arkansas. Whitfield became vice-president of the STFU and helped start numerous divisions in Mississippi County and other parts of the Bootheel. In early 1938, when the La Forge Cooperative Farms opened, the Whitfields were among the original occupant families. Although they were extremely fortunate to be part of that project, Whitfield continued organizing, recognizing that most tenant farmers and laborers were not so lucky.⁴⁴²

As 1938 came to a close, Whitfield knew that many families were going to be told to leave the farms they were sharecropping, because landowners were switching to day labor. It was in December or early January that sharecroppers and landowners informally agreed to another year of sharecropping. In some cases, contracts were written, but more often they were verbal. Rev. Whitfield and other STFU members had been discussing the growing crisis and what to do. At a meeting, someone joked that if they were going to be homeless, they might as well be out on the road. Whitfield ran with the idea of a public roadside demonstration, planned

⁴⁴² Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 13-18, 32; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 96-124.

for January 10, the last date by which sharecroppers had to leave a farm or plantation if they had been evicted.⁴⁴³

Over the previous couple of years, Rev. Whitfield and other organizers had often met with STFU members, or potential members, in places and times where landowner surveillance could be avoided. These included levees, small rural churches and schools, and possibly, on La Forge Farms where Whitfield lived. The week before the roadside demonstration, however, there was a mass meeting at First (Westend) Baptist, a Black church in Sikeston. The organizing for the demonstration had included STFU members and non-members. On the eve of January 7, over 300 African Americans and whites gathered in the church.⁴⁴⁴

On January 10, 1939, approximately 1,500 Black and white sharecroppers and laborers moved their belongings to the side of highways 60 and 61. Whitfield had alerted the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and soon newspapers across the country picked up the story, embarrassing local planters and exerting pressure on the Roosevelt Administration and Missouri Governor Lloyd Stark.⁴⁴⁵ Newspapers across the country sent reporters to the Bootheel to investigate the situation firsthand. Sikeston, in Scott County, became the headquarters for newspapers from Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and other cities. Locals were used to being in the spotlight in regional or state news, but as one editor sarcastically noted, “for several months now we’ve been slipping behind the quota on murders; there has been no excessive rainfall; the river is behaving itself; there have been not twisters – yet – but we’re in the news again...The

⁴⁴³ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 125-128.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁴⁵ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 132-135, 159; Louis Cantor, *A Prologue to the Protest Movement: The Missouri Sharecropper Roadside Demonstration of 1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1969); Smith, *Threshold of Freedom*, 6-25.

sharecroppers have absolutely stolen the spotlight...’’⁴⁴⁶ The demonstration also affected sharecroppers who were not on the roadside. Landlords, reminiscent of slavery, forbade their sharecroppers to hold meetings. In one situation “a tenant group trying to attend a crossroads meeting was broken up and its dilapidated truck confiscated.”⁴⁴⁷

One piece in the Charleston (MO) *Enterprise-Courier* acknowledged that the roadside participants were “calling attention to a pressing and very real problem,” but in the same issue another editorial took a different stance, indicated by the title “Evicted Sharecroppers????” By and large, the reaction of the local press and white elites was outrage that sharecroppers had caused such an embarrassing spectacle. Landowners in particular took offense at the charges that they were to blame for the sharecroppers’ dire situation, claiming the farmers had not been evicted.

When W. D. Byrd of Pemiscot County argued that only a few people had “actually been served with eviction notice,” he was correct in that few sharecroppers or laborers had been served with a written notice. The National Youth Administration (NYA) interviewed many of the roadside protesters, and out of eighty-seven extant interviews, only nine interviewees received written eviction notices. Written contracts between sharecroppers and landowners, however, were rare, and eviction notices typically followed the same verbal tradition. Twenty-four of the NYA interviewees were verbally told to leave. Grant Phillips was “evicted indirectly” when his employer sent him word via his neighbor near the end of December. Nine more protesters had been told there would be no work for them.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ “In the Spotlight Again,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), January 12, 1939.

⁴⁴⁷ Arthur L. Whitman, “Evicted Missouri Sharecroppers,” *Everyday Magazine*, January 12, 1939, f. 19, box 3091, Harold Harwell (H. H.) Lewis Papers, SEMO.

⁴⁴⁸ Memorandum, Aubrey Williams to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 16, 1939, case no. 4, f. “Tenant Farming, 1939-1944,” box 1, Official File 1650, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York.

African Americans' Response to the Demonstration

African Americans in the Bootheel were divided in their response to the demonstration. Some preferred polite, interpersonal negotiation with whites, a sentiment that was more prevalent among, although not limited to, middle-class blacks. L. B. Boler, vocational agriculture teacher at Lincoln High School in Charleston and member of the Board of Curators at the historically black Lincoln University in Jefferson City, criticized the demonstration. He wrote to Missouri Governor Stark and acknowledged that while he had “been working with the people here for more than Twelve years” he “had not heard a thing about it until the day they began moving.”⁴⁴⁹

Once the demonstration began, Boler interviewed sharecroppers and tenants, and in his opinion “about 85% did not have any reason for moving except they were looking for something for nothing, want a living without working for it, and having been led without understanding.” His suggestion to Governor Stark was for landlords, tenants, sharecroppers, and other leaders to come together in a series of “Good Will Meetings” in order to bring about “a mutual understanding and keep down such embarrassments as we are now facing.”⁴⁵⁰ The “embarrassments” he perceived stemmed from his adherence to a middle-class politics of respectability and racial uplift. Boler had faith, as did many Black leaders before him, that African Americans, “through their industry, skill, and enterprise...would gain a place in

⁴⁴⁹ L. B. Boler to Governor Lloyd Stark, January 18, 1939, f. 1938, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, 1931-1941, SHSMO-CO; “Signs Revenue Bill,” *Post-Tribune* (Jefferson City), June 16, 1937. Boler was appointed to the Lincoln University Board of Curators in 1937, a term that went through January 1939.

⁴⁵⁰ L. B. Boler to Governor Lloyd Stark, January 18, 1939, f. 1938, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, 1931-1941, SHSMO-CO.

American society commensurate with their numbers and weight in the economy.”⁴⁵¹ This meant accepting gradual progress. From this perspective, public decorum was essential to a sense of personal dignity, but also for persuading whites that African Americans were worthy of economic, and political equality. To Boler, poor sharecroppers and laborers were making a spectacle of themselves by baring their poverty to the world, and by not seeking the advice of more educated African Americans, or prominent white citizens.

The fact that Boler was not attuned to the demonstration raises a couple possibilities. Perhaps he had prior knowledge but did not want to reveal it to Governor Stark, for fear of jeopardizing his political connections. More likely, his interactions with “the people” tended toward more prosperous Black farmers, such as landowners and renters. Although he owned land in Mississippi County, he lived in the city of Charleston and worked at the high school. If he had been providing outreach to the poorest farmers in the county, he would have heard comments about a possible demonstration, for even planter Thad Snow knew STFU members were considering some kind of demonstration as early as January 1938.⁴⁵² It was not unusual for African Americans involved in agricultural outreach, either through the extension service or vocational education, to focus on more well-off farmers.

In contrast, Professor and historian Lorenzo J. Greene of Lincoln University, was very sympathetic to the protesters. He became aware of the demonstration because he had been asked to come and speak at Lincoln High School in Charleston, perhaps by Boler. Subsequently, he took several trips to the camps and noted that “the least informed negroes are so-called

⁴⁵¹ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 144-149.

⁴⁵² Thad Snow to Chas. G. Ross, January 2, 1938, f. 1, box 1, series 1, Thad Snow Papers, State Historical Society of Missouri – St. Louis.

intellectuals, teachers - principals who either are too timid or too indifferent to visit the camps of the croppers [to] ascertain the real causes of the exodus from the plantations."⁴⁵³ Greene risked his job to assist the sharecroppers and publicly bring attention to their plight. He worked at Lincoln University, and the Board of Curators at different times included members of the white elite in the Bootheel, who could have exerted negative pressure if they chose. Greene was warned to back off by Sherman Scruggs, Lincoln University's president. Scruggs called Greene into his office and accused him of promising the protesters "forty acres and a mule," which was why protesters were refusing to return to plantations. If Greene did not stop his involvement, state officials were threatening to reduce appropriations for Lincoln University. Greene responded, "Mr. President, you can order me to stop. But as long as people are in need, I shall continue to help them. I can't stop, but you can fire me." At that point Scruggs relented.

Greene also heard rumors that he might be killed. In addition to making many trips to the area, he was partly responsible for the national attention the protest brought. Soon after it had begun, Greene contacted alerted Claude Barnett, editor of the *Associated Negro Press*, and also sent letters to the *Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Kansas City Call*. This made him very unpopular in the Bootheel and around the state. When he mentioned the rumors of violence to the father of a friend, he offered to travel with him. He told Greene "You see this rifle? I am a dead shot. They may get us, but we will take at least two along with us." Greene appreciated the offer but declined, and fortunately did not run into any trouble.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ Notes, f. 5, box 41, Academic File, General, Miscellaneous, 1938-1939, 1981-1985, Lorenzo Johnston Greene Papers, LOC.

⁴⁵⁴ Article draft, f. 8, box 41, Academic File, General, Narrative and background material, [ca. 1987], n. d., Lorenzo Johnston Greene Papers, LOC.

Other middle-class African Americans also publicly supported the displaced sharecroppers. Marshall Currin, one of Boler's compatriots in NCFE a few years earlier, had allowed STFU members to meet in his café in Charleston. Business owners supported by black community patronage were less likely to lose their jobs, but they still faced significant risks.⁴⁵⁵ Rev C. L. Williams, pastor of the A.M.E. Church in Charleston, also assisted the demonstrators. His church was used as a distribution point for food and supplies.⁴⁵⁶

Rev. S. D. Woods, minister of the Second (St. John) Baptist Church in Sikeston, took a position similar to L. B. Boler and did his best to distance himself and his congregation from the roadside demonstration. When a local newspaper erroneously printed that Second Baptist, not First Baptist, had been the site of the mass organizational meeting led by Rev. Whitfield before the demonstration, he was quick to print a correction. "I would never allow such meeting in the Second Baptist Church, without consulting the officials of our city."⁴⁵⁷

New Madrid County Colored Farm Subsistence Homestead Association

Rev. S. D. Woods was not against seeking government assistance for African American farmers, but he advocated an approach that emphasized Black respectability, electoral politics, and self-help. In addition to his involvement in local and state Democratic politics, he was Assistant Secretary in the New Madrid County Colored Farm Subsistence Homestead

⁴⁵⁵ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 99.

⁴⁵⁶ "Persecuting the Sharecroppers," *St. Louis Argus*, January 20, 1939. This source says Williams was pastor at "Bethel AME," but it may have been a misprint. Williams was pastor of the Perry Chapel A.M.E. in Charleston. It is possible he pastored two churches, but I have found no other evidence of a Bethel A.M.E. Church.

⁴⁵⁷ Untitled, *Sikeston Standard*, January 20, 1939.

Association (hereafter cited as the New Madrid Homestead Association). This association, incorporated in 1939 by African American tenant farmer J. A. Alexander and others, sought federal funds to purchase land for a cooperative farm project. The organization's proposal was similar to that of the Missouri Farm Homestead Project in 1934, except that rather than being organized by urban interests like the St. Louis Urban League, it was a grassroots effort from farmers themselves, and the idea had originated with Alexander years before when he lived in Arkansas.

The crux of Alexander's government appeals, which spanned 1936-1939, was to obtain a loan for the down payment of a land purchase.⁴⁵⁸ This was one of the most significant impediments to purchasing land for African Americans, and indeed all struggling tenant farmers. J. A. Alexander was more fortunate than many Black farmers, for he was a renter, not a sharecropper, and he had equipment and animals. When he first wrote the Resettlement Administration in January 1936, he had already organized a group of twenty-five other farm renters near Osceola, in Mississippi County, Arkansas, the county just south of Pemiscot in the Missouri Bootheel. He explained that "we are a body of Collerd Farmers that have our own Teams, Implements and feed and too we can find the land for sale, but have not the 1st payments." He proceeded to assure Rexford Tugwell, the Undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture, that they were worthy of this assistance because "we are all law abiding Negroes and have good Reputations in Miss Co." He provided the names of character references, which

⁴⁵⁸ J. A. Alexander to Henry A. Wallace, April 18, 1938, f. "Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.," box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP. I have found correspondence from J. A. Alexander to the federal government for these dates, but in one letter he mentions that he began looking for land for a group settlement as early as 1933. J. A. Alexander to Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, April 18, 1938.

included W. J. Driver, a local planter and congressman, and Cully Cobb, head of the AAA cotton division.⁴⁵⁹

J. A. Alexander's appeal in 1936 was unsuccessful, and by 1938, he had moved to New Madrid County, Missouri, a few miles east of Matthews. In 1937, while in Arkansas, he had met white landowner F. C. Kirkpatrick, who was interested in letting African Americans establish a group project on 1,200 acres of his land in Missouri, potentially selling it to them. For the next two years, Alexander, representing a group of from fifteen to twenty-three farmers, unsuccessfully sought financial assistance from various government officials, including President Roosevelt, and Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace.

Alexander specifically asked for money through the Bankhead-Jones Tenant Act, which had been passed by Congress in 1938. One of its purposes was to provide low-interest, forty-year loans to individual sharecroppers or renters so they could purchase their own land. Like the resettlement projects, clients were screened carefully and had to prove worthiness according to certain criteria. Unfortunately for Alexander, relatively few of these loans were awarded, and they were not available in New Madrid County at the time he applied.⁴⁶⁰

The La Forge Cooperative Farm, discussed above, was in the process of being established in New Madrid County in 1938. It was precisely the type of project Alexander had been hoping for when he was in Arkansas. By 1938, unfortunately, political conflict over the resettlement projects led Congress to cut funding for the establishment of new projects and the expansion of

⁴⁵⁹ J. A. Alexander to Rexford Tugwell, January 20, 1936, f. "Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.," box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴⁶⁰ J. A. Alexander to W. W. Alexander, February 13, 1938; J. A. Alexander to Hon. F. D. Roosevelt, February 13, 1938; J. A. Alexander to Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 18, 1938, J. A. Alexander to Julien Friant, April 21, 1938, J. A. Alexander to Milo Perkins, April 22, 1938, J. A. Alexander to Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 29, 1939, f. Alexander, J. A. AD-580; Alex Cooper, interviewed by Heidi Dodson, October 25, 2012, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

existing ones.⁴⁶¹ The New Madrid Homestead Association, like the Missouri Farm Homestead Project of 1934, appeared to be an ideal opportunity for the government to help a group of Black tenant farmers become landowners. The government's failure in both cases shows the limits of the New Deal when it came to responding to African American planning initiatives. Certainly the RA and the FSA assisted small numbers of Black farmers throughout the South by establishing of projects like La Forge Farms and individual loans through the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. The historical record suggests, however, that there may have been many grassroots cooperative planning visions put forth by African Americans in the South that never got off the ground because the government denied them assistance.⁴⁶²

The membership of the New Madrid Homestead Association provides insight into Black agrarian social networks in the Bootheel, as well as the pragmatism and contradictory ideologies and strategies embraced within the group. J. A. Alexander was clearly skilled in networking, because he had recruited some of the stalwarts in local and state Black agrarian politics. The manager of the organization was Nathaniel C. Bruce, a longtime educational leader in the state and founder of the Dalton School of Agriculture for African Americans in central Missouri. Rev. S. D. Woods of Sikeston, in Scott County, was the Assistant Secretary. It is doubtful that either of these professional men were interested in farming on the proposed cooperative tract, but their names lent a certain gravitas to the endeavor. Similarly, Alexander had recruited members of the Pullen and Warfield families, who were Black landowners in Stoddard County, Missouri. David Burnett, who had been involved in the UNIA and possibly the NCF in Mississippi

⁴⁶¹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 123-124; Milo Perkins to Orville Zimmerman, July 13, 1938, f. AD-MO-16 (913-01), box 412, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 336.

⁴⁶² J. A. Alexander to W. W. Alexander, February 13, 1938; J.A. Alexander to H. G. Reynolds, June 23, 1939, f. "Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.," box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

County, was also a member. The cross-county membership of the organization shows the extent to which agrarian networks operated on a regional level.⁴⁶³

The New Madrid Homestead Association was incorporated in 1939, not long after the sharecropper roadside demonstration, which had thrown the region into such turmoil. In fact, there was a large camp of roadside protesters near the town of Matthews in New Madrid County, where J. A. Alexander and others were renting land. Alexander disavowed their tactics, deciding a more conciliatory approach would work best. In a letter to the federal government, he emphasized that “Southern negroes are a good – peacible, Hard working – Obedient – submissive people.” Echoing the erroneous statement by local planters that the demonstrators were not local, he wrote “Please Note we are up here where that Highway demonstration accured last Jan 10th but please understand, not a one of my group was connected with it or had any sympathy for such as they were mostly transient labor or cotton pickers that come in here last fall.”⁴⁶⁴

In truth, as many as five members of his group had demonstrated in January. James DuPriest, James Harrison, Albert Jackson, Ridley Jones, and Joe McCoy were listed on a petition signed by roadside demonstrators near Matthews on March 27, and on the application for incorporation of the New Madrid Homestead Association in April 1939.⁴⁶⁵ In January, after about a week of the roadside demonstration, local and state law enforcement, with justification

⁴⁶³ N. C. Bruce to Henry A. Wallace, April 20, 1939, f. “January-June 1939,” box 230, Entry 51, General Correspondence, Records of the FHA, NARA-Chicago.

⁴⁶⁴ J. A. Alexander to Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 29, 1939, f. “Alexander, A. Thru Alfo, C.,” box 1, Plats and Miscellaneous Records of the Resettlement Administration and FHA, 1936-1952, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁴⁶⁵ Johnnie F. Moore, et al. to Gov. Lloyd Stark, March 27, 1939, f. 1939, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, SHSMO-CO; N. C. Bruce to Henry A. Wallace, April 20, 1939, f. “January-June 1939,” box 230, Entry 51, General Correspondence, Records of the FHA, NARA-Chicago. The New Madrid Homestead Association petition and the federal census lists James Dupree, but I believe this is the same person as James Dupriest, who signed the sharecropper petition to Governor Stark. Similarly, I believe the J. W. McCoy on the Stark petition is the Joe McCoy on the New Madrid Homestead Association petition.

from the state health inspector, forcibly removed protesters from the roadside. Some were moved to the New Madrid-Bird's Point Floodway in New Madrid County, a site that became known as "Homeless Junction."⁴⁶⁶ Others, in a petition sent to Governor Stark in March 1939, complained that they were "forcibly hauled back to the shacks on various plantations against our wishes, and in many cases over the landlords' protests." They asked the governor for tents, land, food, and Works Progress Administration (WPA) jobs, arguing that "We feel that we are entitled to this since we want to work and since we are Americans and since we helped to make America what it is today."⁴⁶⁷

The plantation of F. C. Kirkpatrick, where J. A. Alexander and others farmed, was one of the places law enforcement dropped off demonstrators. On March 29, 1939, two days after protesters at Matthews sent a petition to Governor Stark, Donald Henderson, president of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) wrote Stark to alert him that "a warrant has been served on eighteen families now camping in shacks at Matthews, Missouri. These shacks are located on F. C. Kirkpatrick's farm where the state police put these people. The warrant served on them commands them to appear in the Justice of the Peace Court at New Madrid, Missouri, on April first, charged with trespassing."⁴⁶⁸

This is probably how some of the Matthews area roadside demonstrators became involved with Alexander and his organization, but they also may have worked on Kirkpatrick's land before the demonstration. A January 12, 1939 news article reported that "A number of former workers on the F. C. Kirkpatrick plantation...are at the Matthews lane." J. A. Alexander

⁴⁶⁶ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 144-46.

⁴⁶⁷ Johnnie F. Moore, et al. to Gov. Lloyd Stark, March 27, 1939, f. 1939, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, 1931-1941, SHSMO-CO.

⁴⁶⁸ Donald Henderson to Lloyd Stark, March 29, 1939, f. 1939, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, 1931-1941, SHSMO-CO.

and Bud Johnson (also part of the Homestead Association) were “supervisors of the plantation.”⁴⁶⁹ Albert Jackson and others who had been at the roadside clearly held different ideas about which strategies to use to foment change, compared to J. A. Alexander, whose supervisory position provided some security. Still, for sharecroppers like Jackson the New Madrid Homestead Association provided another source of hope for obtaining land, given that the government had done very little to address their needs in the wake of the roadside protest. Unfortunately, the members of the New Madrid Homestead Association were never able to purchase land. J. A. Alexander continued to rent farm land in the Matthews area until his death and was fairly successful. In 1940, Joe McCoy, James DuPriest [Dupree], Robert Coburn, and Albert Jackson were working as laborers clearing land in rural New Madrid County.⁴⁷⁰

Pinhook and the Christian Era Association

During the same year the New Madrid Homestead Association was incorporated, a group of about fifty Black sharecropping families in the Pinhook neighborhood of Mississippi County made plans to collectively purchase land in the New Madrid-Bird’s Point Floodway. On January 12, 1940, the Christian Era Association purchased 1,827 acres. The farming settlement, like the roadside demonstration, was a response to the widespread sharecropper displacement taking place in the Bootheel and throughout the South. Although the unincorporated farming

⁴⁶⁹ “Missouri Farm Laborers are Persuaded to Leave Home by CIO Leaders,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, January 12, 1939.

⁴⁷⁰ “Tenant Farmers Do Prosper on Southeast Missouri Farms,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, December 4, 1941; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, “Joe McCoy, Robert Coburn, Albert Jackson,” St. John, New Madrid, MO, p. 6B; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, “James Dupree,” St. John, New Madrid, MO, p. 6A.

community had no formal name at that time, it eventually became known as Pinhook, the name of the rural neighborhood associated with Pinhook Ridge.⁴⁷¹

Evidence suggests that the Christian Era Association was connected to the Christian Liberty Baptist Association of the Second District, a loosely affiliated group of thirty or forty Missionary Baptist churches that spanned Mississippi, Stoddard, and Scott counties. Its parent organization was the Third District of Southeast Missouri, which was very active throughout the Bootheel in the 1920s and early 1930s, but the Christian Liberty District had formed by at least 1932. The Christian Liberty District's interest in Black economic development began in the early 1930s, if not earlier. The organization wanted to decrease members' dependence on whites for jobs and housing. One plan that never came to fruition was to buy land outside Charleston, in Mississippi County, to build some kind of factory.⁴⁷²

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that “the black Baptist convention movement formed part of an emergent black nationalism that resonated throughout the African American population and invoked feelings of racial pride and self-determination.” This nationalism was reflected in the construction of schools, churches, and publications that were independent from white Baptists and that constituted a separate Black civil and political sphere. Higginbotham also points out that the establishment of Black Baptist institutions has been rarely analyzed. The

⁴⁷¹ “50 Negro Families Purchase 2,000-Acre Tract for Colony,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), February 23, 1940; Christian Era Association, Deed of Trust, January 12, 1940, book 126, p. 364, Recorder of Deeds, Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston, MO.

⁴⁷² Christian Liberty Association, Deed of Trust, March 25, 1938, book 122, p. 337; Trustees of the Mount Era [Erie] MB Church, Deed of Trust, January 2, 1942, book 133, p. 92, Recorder of Deeds, Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston, Missouri; Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012; “Wardell, MO,” *Chicago Defender*, November 30, 1929. In 1938 the Christian Liberty Association purchased 240 acres in the same vicinity where the Christian Era Association ended up purchasing land. Dr. Eugene Speller, who grew up in the area, and whose parents Bud and Nicula, were sharecroppers and founding members of the Christian Liberty Association, believes the organizations were related. W. M. Wells was a trustee of the Christian Liberty Association in 1938, and of the Mt. Erie Baptist Church established at Pinhook.

Christian Era association's purchase of over 1,800 acres of land reveals the importance of expanding the purview of this research to include landownership and rural community planning.

In 1949, the Christian Liberty Association also purchased land that became a Black housing community, named Pernermon after District moderator, Rev. J. O. Pernermon. Located in Stoddard County, it offered an opportunity for displaced sharecroppers to own their own homes.⁴⁷³

The Black families who purchased land as the Christian Era Association were sharecroppers or renters. According to Dr. Eugene Speller, who grew up in the area, "The rural communities around Charleston and East Prairie were not communities like the communities down south and elsewhere that had some black professionals, school teachers and professionals and the like..." While individuals had little formal education, many were ministers and leaders in the area. Men and women involved in the founding of the community were politically astute, and determined to better their circumstances through landownership. Rev. James Wright, who was from Louisiana, had been member of the Wyatt UNIA in the 1920s. Rev. Steward D. Sloan was from Mound Bayou, Mississippi, and thus had seen first-hand how an all-Black community could provide greater social and economic autonomy. Eugene Speller's uncle Frank Speller, a trustee of Mt. Erie Baptist Church at Pinhook, was also from Mound Bayou, where he had known Rev. Sloan. Other Christian Era Association trustees included James Homer Cross, from Lee County, Arkansas, and A. B. Ellerson, who may have been from Haywood County, Tennessee. Some of the trustees moved to Missouri during the 1920s, and others during the

⁴⁷³ Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012; Trustees of the Christian Liberty Missionary Baptist Association of Sikeston, 2nd District, deed of trust, book 91, page 631, June 14, 1949, Stoddard County Courthouse, Bloomfield, MO. Pernermon incorporated in 1971 because it facilitated getting federal funds for a sewer system. Joint Center for Political Studies, *Profiles of Black Mayors in America* (Washington D. C.: Joint Center for Political Studies and Johnson Publishing Co., 1977), 109.

1930s.⁴⁷⁴ The Christian Era Association served a temporary purpose in facilitating the original land purchase. On April 14, 1941, forty individual families purchased family farms from the 1,800 acres that were collectively purchased in 1940. In 1941, fourteen more families purchased land.⁴⁷⁵

The Christian Era Association purchased its tract one year after the sharecropper roadside demonstration, and one week after Missouri Governor Lloyd Stark convened a conference in St. Louis of sharecroppers, landowners, and local, state, and federal officials, to come up with government solutions for the widespread displacement of sharecroppers in the Bootheel.⁴⁷⁶ The state and federal government had been slow to respond with substantial proposals to address the 1939 crisis, but when sharecroppers and laborers threatened another demonstration in 1940, Governor Stark acted quickly.

The privately negotiated origin of the Pinhook community was touted in a news article announcing the land sale, and it functioned as a counterpoint to what some whites perceived as government interference in the region. The author of the article indicated it was “one of the first attempted by private individuals in this section and the results will doubtless be of much value in the solving of the major problem of this county, that pertaining to the welfare of the

⁴⁷⁴ “50 Negro Families Purchase 2,000-Acre Tract for Colony,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), February 23, 1940; Trustees of the Christian Liberty Association of Second District of the County of Mississippi, Missouri, Deed of Trust, March 25, 1938, Book 122, Page 337, Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston, Missouri.

⁴⁷⁵ Deeds of Trust, April 14, 1941, book 127, pages 367-407; Deeds of Trust, December 1, 1941, book 133, pages 10, 13, 15, 18, 20, 23, 26 28, 34, 36, 124.

⁴⁷⁶ “Move to Assist Farm Workers,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), January 6, 1940.

sharecroppers.” The statement noted that a white project might be implemented if there was enough interest.⁴⁷⁷

The Christian Era Association obtained financing from the Roberts and Davis Gin Company in nearby East Prairie. During the 1930s, gin companies were where many farmers obtained loans, not banks. It would have been unusual, however, for a gin company to loan over \$16,000 to African Americans. One possible explanation lies in the timing of the sale. The 1939 roadside demonstration caused white planters and businessmen a great deal of national embarrassment, and with the threat of another demonstration they sought to avert this situation, showing that they could deal with the crisis privately. Another aspect was that the Association was able to pay 10 percent down on the land. Because many of the families had lived in the area for years before purchasing land, they may have established good relations with the gin.

Finally, the fact that the land was cutover (with stumps to remove), made the land less desirable and reduced the price per acre to about ten dollars. It was extremely fertile soil, rich from the alluvial deposits of the Mississippi River, but parts of the Pinhook community seasonally flooded because of a gap in the Mississippi River levee. Moreover, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers retained the right to dynamite the levee and inundate the 130,000 acres of the Bird’s Point-New Madrid Floodway, which it had done in 1937. Hundreds of tenant farmers in the floodway had to flee to nearby towns for shelter. The families in the Christian Era Association knew firsthand, then, the risks of buying land in that location, but whites would not sell them land elsewhere.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁷ “50 Negro Families Purchase 2,000-Acre Tract for Colony,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), February 23, 1940; “Move to Assist Farm Workers,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), January 6, 1940.

⁴⁷⁸ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 104-111; *Water Resources Development Issues and Corps Reforms*; Hearing Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate, 107th Cong., 2nd session (June 18, 2002) (statement of Jim Robinson, Jr., farmer).

While the Christian Era Association purchased its land through private, rather than government financing, individual families had also been involved in the STFU and thus were not averse to using public protest to fight for the rights of the rural poor. At least three residents, Lemon Miner, Joseph Carter, and Rev. A. W. Scott, were members of the STFU. Joseph Carter and Rev. Scott were officers in the Pinhook local and Lemon Miner was a member of a Scott County local.⁴⁷⁹ There were also family and social connections between other residents and those involved in the roadside demonstration. Like the New Madrid Homestead Association, then, members were willing to pursue different strategies in order to maintain a stable, agrarian life.

The 1930s were years of political, social, and economic ferment in the Bootheel. African Americans' desire for land and a sustainable agrarian life shaped their political and organizational activity, and the diversity of the collective endeavors they adopted was striking. In the midst of the Depression, and their displacement from plantations, African Americans constructed visions of rural community planning that provided alternatives to government-initiated, top-down professional planning. They sought to carry out their visions through individual hard work, assistance from New Deal government programs, local Black church support, and loans from local white institutions. The range of organizations involved in Black activism and rural planning, such as the Christian Era Association, New Madrid Homestead Association, NCF, and STFU, represented solidarities and fractures among African Americans regarding the best strategies and tactics for securing stable rural communities. In particular, some members of the Black middle class, and tenant farmers who adhered to a Washingtonian ethic of self-help and gradualism, were less likely to support the protest tactics of the STFU.

⁴⁷⁹ Joseph Carter and A. W. Scott, Monthly Report of Membership and Fees, Pinhook Local, August 26, 1938, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, roll 10, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

The desire for land among African Americans persisted into the 1940s, but seeming possibilities opened up by the New Deal, and the sale of land by lumber and insurance companies, disappeared as agriculture consolidated and mechanized. Black housing projects and home ownership emerged as another avenue for economic independence. As the following chapter shows, in the wake of the transition to day labor, many African Americans found a measure of stability and freedom in government housing projects. Located off plantations, they served as spaces of labor and civil rights organization. This freedom was constrained, however, by state paternalism and accommodations to the planter class.

CHAPTER 5

MOVING OFF THE PLANTATIONS:
THE DELMO HOUSING PROJECTS, 1939-1945

In the 1940s, as a result of the transition from sharecropping to day labor, one of the biggest challenges Black workers faced was finding decent housing off plantations.⁴⁸⁰ There was a housing shortage for Black and white workers across the region, but for African Americans the situation was exacerbated because they were excluded from many towns and rural areas in the region.⁴⁸¹ They responded to this challenge with a range of strategies, including pressuring the federal government to provide affordable housing, and collectively establishing all-Black communities in which they built their own housing.⁴⁸²

The 1939 roadside demonstration drew attention to the displacement of sharecroppers, but neither local, state, nor federal government officials responded with long-term solutions. This changed as the end of 1939 approached, when sharecroppers and laborers threatened another demonstration. On January 5, 1940, Missouri Governor Lloyd Stark called a conference of cotton planters, sharecroppers, government officials, and religious leadership in order to avert protest and formulate solutions for rural homelessness and unemployment. It took place in St.

⁴⁸⁰ Parts of this chapter have been published in “Race and Contested Rural Space in the Missouri Delta: African American Workers and the Delmo Labor Homes, 1940-1951,” *Buildings & Landscapes*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 2016). The University of Minnesota Press and the Vernacular Architecture Forum have granted permission to reprint.

⁴⁸¹ “Sharecropper-Tenant Difficulties in Southeast Missouri Again Hit the Headlines of City Newspapers,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), January 11, 1940; Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 146-147.

⁴⁸² Locally organized Black housing and farming communities include Pendermon in Stoddard County, Haywood City in Scott County, Pinhook in Mississippi County, Hayti Heights in Pemiscot County, and Howardville in New Madrid County. Cropperville, in Butler County, was interracial, but predominately Black.

Louis and included Black sharecroppers and union organizers Rev. Owen Whitfield and Johnnie Moore, as well as white sharecroppers C. E. Underhill and Andy Miederhoff.⁴⁸³

On that day, and in subsequent meetings, attendees developed a “Five Point Plan,” which the FSA would administer, that included housing, rehabilitation loans, land leasing, and land purchasing cooperatives. One part of this plan, the construction of ten group housing projects for agricultural laborers, was an experimental endeavor for the cotton South, and it became a touchstone of white opposition, particularly among the landowning elite. The housing projects were collectively called the Delmo (Delta Missouri) Labor Homes, or Housing Projects, and they were comprised of a total of 500 houses in three Black and seven white communities spread across the six-county region on federally-owned land. The locations of the projects are shown in Figure 22. The small scope of the project, however, was not sufficient to meet the need of all the families who were displaced.⁴⁸⁴

Despite the relatively small number of housing projects built, the Delmo communities became targets of planter opposition, because during the early 1940s, residents used them as relatively secure bases from which to organize and strike for higher wages. These homes and communities also provided economic security by facilitating home food production and the

⁴⁸³ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 156; “Stark Calls FSA Head to Discuss Sharecroppers,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), January 4, 1940; “Launch Move to Assist District Farm Workers,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), January 6, 1940; Bishop William Scarlett to Gov. Lloyd Stark, December 21, 1939, f. 1940; Sallye W Powel to Bishop William Scarlett, telegram, December 27, 1939, f. 1940; Notes, undated, f. 1940, Stark Papers, SHS. Starks’ handwritten notes conveyed a sense of urgency, with comments like “Conference, not Coercion (Dangerous Situation)” and “Time is short (Must act quickly).”

⁴⁸⁴ “New FSA Plan for Semo Farmers Gets Under Way,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), March 7, 1940; Smith, *Delmo*, 14, 17. According to C. L. R. James, a Marxist writer, theorist, and activist who had visited the Bootheel, when Johnnie Moore met with Governor Stark, the governor, the head of the state police, and other agency heads “tried to beat him down” in the negotiations. Finally, they offered 10,000 houses and ten acres of land per family. Moore refused to accept without consulting the union. Governor Stark then met with Whitfield, who agreed to the lesser terms of 500 rather than 10,000 houses. See C. L. R. James, “With the Sharecroppers,” in C. L. R. James *on the ‘Negro Question,’* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 26.

freedom to travel seasonally in search of higher wages, while maintaining a home to which they could return. Particularly galling to planters and local residents was the fact that Black workers leveraged the relative autonomy of their communities to challenge white supremacy, as well as the hierarchical class structure of the region.

Scholarship on the rural New Deal acknowledges the limited positive impact federal rural programs had on the lives of Black families. As Sydney Baldwin noted in his institutional history of the FSA and its predecessor agencies, “about 22 per cent of the farms in the South during the early 1960’s were still operated by tenants and sharecroppers, and many Negro tenant families continued to live at a level relatively unchanged from the days of the Great Depression.” Numerically, the number of families affected were small when considering the scope of need in the rural South. Moreover, while there were individual employees within the FSA who sought to empower African Americans socially and economically, the agency usually bowed to the interests of the white power structure.⁴⁸⁵

The weakness of this scholarship is that it has not sufficiently analyzed the ways in which Black families used federal programs to further their own interests, not only during the FSA’s relatively short existence, but in subsequent decades. This topic has received more attention recently. Greta de Jong’s work, for example, shows how the Louisiana Farmers Union pressured the federal government for access to loans, land, and education. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, while focusing on 1960s Black Power in Lowndes County, Alabama, notes the importance of land ownership to activism at the former RA resettlement project of White Hall. Sociologist Spencer

⁴⁸⁵ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 414-415. See also, Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*; Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 25-41.

Wood argues that Black landownership stemming from the FSA Mileston Farms Project in Mississippi was critical to the community's civil rights activism in the 1960s.⁴⁸⁶

Scholars of African American urban history have documented the experience of families who left agriculture and moved to cities in the North and South, including the spatial inequalities they encountered and the ways in which they transformed the spaces in which they lived and worked.⁴⁸⁷ Scholars who study the rural South, however, have not fully considered how African Americans who remained in the twentieth-century rural South created new community geographies in response to economic change, and the ways in which these new spaces expanded and constrained their quest for autonomy and citizenship rights.⁴⁸⁸

This chapter argues that in the Missouri Bootheel, African Americans pressured the federal government to provide access to decent housing and then used the increased autonomy and stability afforded by the Delmo Housing Projects to fight for higher wages and greater control over their lives. Conversely, their experiences reveal how whites attempted to control Black autonomy and mobility through political attacks on the Delmo projects, attempts to force African Americans back onto plantations, and efforts to keep them from traveling for more

⁴⁸⁶ Greta de Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*; Spencer D. Wood, "the Roots of Black Power: Land, Civil Society, and the State in the Mississippi Delta, 1935-1968" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006). Some work has also been produced on Tillery, North Carolina. See Elijah Gaddis, "Locating the agrarian imaginary in Tillery, North Carolina," MA Thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2013.

⁴⁸⁷ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*; Phillips *AlabamaNorth*; Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*; Adams; *Way Up North in Louisville*.

⁴⁸⁸ Exceptions include some of the scholars mentioned above, who have considered the importance of federal New Deal projects. Scholarship that has considered privately-funded communities includes Robert Hunt Ferguson, "Race and the Remaking of the Rural South: Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm in Jim Crow-Era Mississippi" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012). This is a significant literature on Black towns and "freedom colonies" established in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town*, and Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). Geographer Charles S. Aiken, in his examination of the changing geography of the plantation South, notes the creation of autonomous Black rural enclaves. See *The Cotton Plantation South*, 159-161.

lucrative employment. Black mobility has long been a contested terrain of power, on which whites have tried to control how African Americans move through and occupy space and place. As many historians have argued, in the rural South sharecroppers' frequent moves in search of better opportunities and struggle to escape from debt peonage and violence have been forms of resistance to white control.⁴⁸⁹ At the same time, however, frequent moves came with costs that included separation from family, uneven education for children, and general insecurity. Moreover, African Americans also moved to escape retribution when they challenged white authority. Thus, in the face of forced mobility, choosing to stay in a certain place and claim the rights of citizenship was a form of resistance.

This chapter illustrates the tensions inherent in mobility, and the formation of new community geographies, by analyzing Black residents' battles over territory, labor, and housing in relation to the Delmo Housing Projects. First, it looks at how the region's Border South geography and labor conditions influenced the projects' design and purpose, and how they fit into the larger context of national public housing and New Deal planning. The federal government saw the region as a "laboratory for the cotton South," because the transition from sharecropping to day labor was occurring so rapidly. The Bootheel was a "laboratory," in the sense that the FSA implemented a wide array of programs, but also because the Delmo projects were the federal government's first attempt, in the cotton South, to create long-term, permanent communities for the growing numbers of farm laborers.⁴⁹⁰

Next, the chapter explores divergent perspectives over whether housing should be built on plantations, and whether they should take the form of individual, scattered housing or

⁴⁸⁹ Cobb, *Most Southern Place*, 106-07; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 15.

⁴⁹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Farm Security Administration, *Southeast Missouri*, 1.

cooperative group housing projects. This decision had significant implications for worker autonomy. On one hand, group projects on federal land facilitated independence and organizing among farm workers. On the other hand, they reinforced existing patterns of racial subordination through segregated projects, federal paternalism, and the fact that Black workers had few employment options outside agriculture. These tensions are starkly illuminated through three events at the South Wardell project: conflict over whether white or Black workers should occupy the homes; Black residents' attempt to obtain higher wages for cotton picking; and Mozetta Henry's rebellion against government rules regarding the built environment. Finally, this chapter looks at residents' fight against federal eviction in 1945, when Congress mandated liquidation of FSA projects. The collective fight of residents to remain in their homes reveals the value they placed on the communities they lived in, and their refusal to return to plantation life.

Background on Early Twentieth-Century Federal Housing

The Delmo Housing Projects were an example of New Deal public housing, although rural housing often gets left out of this historiography. Providing historical context helps situate the Delmo projects in relation to other projects and agencies, as well as political backlash against the homes. The federal government first provided low-cost housing during World War I, when there was a housing shortage for defense workers. Urban reformers had been concerned about poor housing quality and shortages for some time, but the exigencies of war provided new urgency to the situation, particularly from the standpoint of production. In general, public sentiment was opposed to government ownership and management of housing because it placed

property outside the free market. Moreover, there was a widespread belief that home ownership “makes a man a better citizen.”⁴⁹¹

Government housing was considered necessary as a temporary solution, however, and in 1918 the U.S. Housing Corporation was formed. At the end of the war, the Housing Corporation was liquidated. There was little public or private support for continuing government housing, except from the professional planning community. For the first time, planners had been able to experiment on a large scale with efficiency and design for worker housing, inspired by the English garden cities, which included open space and were self-contained in order to encourage “a cooperation, a unity, and a community of spirit.”⁴⁹²

It was not until the New Deal of the 1930s that the federal government again became involved in building housing for workers. The impetus this time was not war, but economic depression. Moreover, the housing crisis affected more than the working class. By early 1933, homes were foreclosing at a rate of over one thousand a day. Resistance to the federally funded government housing remained, but desperation led politicians and real estate interests to be more open-minded to experimentation.⁴⁹³

The first public housing during the New Deal was Techwood Homes in Atlanta, built in 1934 by the Public Works Administration (PWA). While this project was lauded by many and it contributed to the passage of the Housing Act of 1937, it also served as a template for racial segregation in federal housing. The government only allowed white tenants in the project, and

⁴⁹¹ Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), quoting the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Housing Commission, 50.

⁴⁹² Radford, *Modern Housing*, 14-17, 37-43; William J. O'Toole, “A Prototype of Public Housing Policy: The USHC,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 34, no. 3 (1968): 140-145, 149-151. On page 150, O'Toole is quoting American planner Electus D. Litchfield.

⁴⁹³ Radford, *Modern Housing*, 76, 85-109.

the 604 new homes displaced 1,611 families, of which 28 percent were African American. Some Black families, but not all, were able to move into the University Homes project in Atlanta, built shortly after Techwood. Urban public housing, as historian Rhonda Y. Williams has argued, offered African American women and their families a mixed bag of opportunity and discrimination, possibilities and restrictions, freedoms and surveillance."⁴⁹⁴

At the same time the PWA was building low-income urban housing, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) began constructing emergency housing for thousands of predominately white migratory farm workers in California. Often called “Okies” or “Arkies,” these were farmers and farm laborers displaced from southern and midwestern states by depression and drought. Migratory agricultural workers had for decades been part of the California landscape, but a significant portion had been Mexican, Chinese, and Filipino men living in labor camps owned by their employers. Regulatory agencies like the California Commission of Immigration and Housing, inspected camps and recommended improvements, but their expectations and recommendations were shaped by racialized assumptions about different standards of living. In the 1930s, as a result of the growing number of white migratory families and farm worker strikes, the state of California and then the federal government began to build labor camps. The camps were designed with contradictory goals. One was to improve the quality of living conditions and encourage community democracy through camp councils. The other was to simultaneously stabilize the labor supply for growers and quell labor unrest

⁴⁹⁴ Radford, *Modern Housing*, 89, 99-100, 104-105. The PWA was formed as a result of the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. It contained a provision for the “construction, reconstruction, alteration, or repair under public regulation or control of low-cost housing and slum-clearance projects.” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, s. v. “Techwood Homes,” by Irene V. Holliman, last modified June 4, 2013, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/>; Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

through paternalism, and by increasing the quality of worker housing and available social amenities.⁴⁹⁵

Geographer Don Mitchell has observed in his work on California migrant labor that when the federal government constructed labor camps on the West Coast, it took the mobility of the workers for granted and saw it as a necessary condition of industrialized agriculture.⁴⁹⁶ As the number of migrant workers, particularly white families, rapidly increased, however, the government became more concerned with stemming migrancy because of its deleterious effect on citizenship, the increasing public visibility of whites living in Hooverilles and other temporary camps, and the potential for labor unrest.⁴⁹⁷ According to historian Cindy Hahamovitch, “FSA officials did not pretend to be providing good housing or a permanent solution to the migrant problem. Rather, they defended the labor camp program as an emergency, stopgap strategy, merely a small part of a larger effort.”⁴⁹⁸

As the crisis of displaced labor continued to grow in the late 1930s, however, particularly in the cotton South, the FSA shifted toward the construction of permanent homes and an exploration of long-term solutions that would stabilize labor in the South. Agriculture in California had industrialized by the beginning of the twentieth century, but the effects of farm

⁴⁹⁵ Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, 11, 46-53, 92-109, 178-97.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁹⁷ Memorandum, John Fischer to Russell Lord, May 5 1941, f. AD-MO-16 Southeast Missouri Project 060, box 411, FSA Project Records, 1935-1940, Missouri, MO-1 to MO-16, RG 96, NARA-CP; Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, 176-197. John Fischer’s memorandum has to do with the La Forge Cooperative Farm in Missouri, which he saw as an ideal antidote for the “aimless shifting” of landless farmers. This mobility, he argued, led to bad citizenship. Mitchell shows that in California, the state and federal governments thought labor unrest could be quelled by providing more stable housing through labor camps, which would ostensibly protect the ideals of democracy. In reality, these camps were sites of worker struggle, and the government both encouraged and inhibited worker freedom.

⁴⁹⁸ Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 156.

consolidation in the cotton South began in the early 1930s when sharecroppers faced eviction and demotion to day laborer. This was the crisis that precipitated the 1939 sharecropper roadside demonstration in the Bootheel.⁴⁹⁹ This demonstration, and Black and white workers' threats to hold another in January 1940, created enough pressure to force state and federal agencies to act. It also provided the FSA with leeway to experiment with solutions that normally would have garnered staunch opposition; indeed, the projects they implemented were eventually targeted by politicians.

A Housing "Laboratory for the Cotton South": The Origins and Design of the Delmo Housing Projects

The Delmo Labor Homes were an experimental endeavor for the FSA. The agency had recently constructed some permanent labor homes at California, Texas, and Florida camps, but they were additions to camps that were originally designed for temporary worker residence.⁵⁰⁰ The Delmo Projects were the first housing projects classified as migratory labor camps that were designed for permanent, long-term occupation from their inception. They were also the first federal group housing projects in the Lower Mississippi Valley designed for the growing workforce of farm laborers. Up to that point, most of the FSA's efforts were geared towards

⁴⁹⁹ Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, 58-61; Greg Hise, "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes: Housing and Community Planning for California's Migrant Work Force, 1935-1941," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 5 (1995): 243-58.

⁵⁰⁰ Hise, "Roadside Camps, 243-58; "Labor Homes for Agricultural Workers in Osceola Migratory Labor Camps. Belle Glade, Florida." Photograph, February 1941, Marion Post Wolcott, LC-USF34- 057147-D, FSA/OWI Collection, LOC, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000037685/PP/>; "Detail of house for permanent agricultural worker at migratory labor camp at Robstown, Texas," photograph, March 1940, Russell Lee, LC-USF34- 035711-D, FSA/OWI Collection, LOC, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000016997/PP/> The Delmo housing projects were the first labor camps in the Missouri Bootheel.

resettling sharecroppers on cooperative farm projects, or building individual housing in a scattered pattern across plantations.⁵⁰¹

The Bootheel's Border South location shaped federal experimentation in this region and the permanent housing design of the Delmo houses. Although the Delmo communities were classified as migratory labor camps, the FSA saw them as serving a different population than labor camps on the east and west coasts. According to FSA administrator Frank Haverly, "The Delmo Labor Homes differed from other labor supply centers in that its primary function was to provide better housing for farm labor families more or less permanently resident in the project areas, whereas other farm labor centers were established to house migrant workers following the crop cycles throughout the country."⁵⁰² Many of the coastal migrant workers were considered to be permanent transients, because they did not have a home base or residency in a particular state. On the East Coast many of the workers were African Americans who had left Georgia seeking work, because there were few sharecropping opportunities. The FSA hoped to head off such a situation in the rest of the Cotton South. It saw the mobility of farm labor as an impediment to community stability, democracy, and good citizenship.⁵⁰³

The Bootheel was also considered a "laboratory for the cotton South" because it was experiencing the effects of agricultural mechanization and federal policy more acutely and at a faster rate than many parts of the South.⁵⁰⁴ The Federal Emergency Relief Administration

⁵⁰¹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 175–76; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 93–213; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 17–29.

⁵⁰² Smith, *Delmo*, 152–154.

⁵⁰³ Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 114–16.

⁵⁰⁴ U.S. Farm Security Administration, *Southeast Missouri*, 1.

(FERA) had previously designated the Bootheel as one of six “problem areas” in the county.⁵⁰⁵

As R. W. Hudgens, Assistant Administrator of the FSA, explained to Congress in 1943, "In that area, the southern plantation system, in a sense, met up with northern farming methods and intensified many of the factors in the trend of American agriculture. We have done a lot in southeast Missouri. It has been said that we have tried almost everything that we have tried anywhere."⁵⁰⁶ When Governor Stark convened the meeting in January 1940 in St. Louis, designed to deal with a growing human and agricultural crisis, it drew widespread attention because “the problem was one for all the South where cotton is produced, but the conference might herald a new era, might provide the prescription to bring the solution.”⁵⁰⁷ Thus, while the meeting, and the FSA programs that came out of it, had the short-term goal of addressing the shortage of housing and work for farm laborers in the Bootheel, the bigger issue was the transformation of agriculture, which was restructuring the landscape of the cotton South.⁵⁰⁸

Scattered Individual Housing vs. Cooperative Group Projects

One of the decisions addressed by Governor Stark’s committee, which ultimately influenced Black labor and civil rights activism, was whether houses should be built individually

⁵⁰⁵ Aiken, *Cotton Plantation South*, 126; Typescript, “Southeast Missouri Study,” 1937, Entry 52, Records of the FHA, NARA-Chicago.

⁵⁰⁶ *Farm Security Administration*; Hearings before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to Investigate the Activities of the FSA, part 2, U.S. House of Representatives, 78th Congress, 1st Session, 690 (June 7-July 2, 1943)(statement of R. W. Hudgens); *Water Resources Development Issues and Corps Reforms*; Hearing Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate, 107th Cong., 2nd session (June 18, 2002) (statement of Jim Robinson, Jr., farmer).

⁵⁰⁷ “Move to Assist Farm Workers,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), January 6, 1940.

⁵⁰⁸ “New FSA Plan for Semo Farmers Gets Under Way,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), March 7, 1940.

and located in a scattered pattern across privately-owned plantations, or whether they should be constructed as group projects with shared community facilities. Planters preferred that worker housing be located in a scattered pattern on plantations, where they could exert the most control over labor and reinforce white supremacy. They feared that if Black workers lived in close proximity to one another, they would find it easier to organize for better wages and other issues, like education, and that they would become “uppity” or “clannish.”⁵⁰⁹ They opposed “the socialistic scheme of putting the farm families in large or small colonies.” Landowners also objected to group projects because “such a plan would entail the building of schools and churches, the development of roads, etc. that would prove more expensive.”⁵¹⁰ E. P. Coleman, a cotton planter with land in Scott County, Missouri, who was part of Governor Stark’s planning committee, suggested that landowners could build houses on five acre tracts and lease them to the FSA.⁵¹¹

Initially, the FSA chose to follow variations of Coleman’s suggestion and constructed over 300 individual worker houses that were scattered across privately-owned plantations.⁵¹² One of the primary goals of the FSA was, after all, to stabilize the labor supply in order to appease planters. This reflected a shift in labor needs as a result of federal policy and farm mechanization. Instead of year-round sharecroppers, landowners now needed large numbers of seasonal workers. In order to protect worker interests, the agency included conditions in written leases that provided for longer leases, protection from eviction, and land for gardens.

⁵⁰⁹ “Fairness of FSA Brought Opposition,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 5, 1945.

⁵¹⁰ “See Solution to Problem of Farm Workers,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), January 10, 1940.

⁵¹¹ Notes, 28 December 1939, f. 1941, Stark Papers, SHS.

⁵¹² P. G. Beck to Dr. W. W. Alexander, 2 May 1940, f. AD-MO-21 540, box 414, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

Not long after approving this plan, however, FSA administrators decided the scattered homes would be unsatisfactory because, according to R. W. Hudgens, “there was no provision for community facilities, no plumbing, no schools, no crossroads, nor all the other things that make a community a decent place to live.” P. G. Beck, regional FSA director, believed a “much more effective job can be done in the close settlement type because of the possibilities of getting people together frequently and teaching them to work out their own problems.”⁵¹³ This ideology, and its application to changing labor needs, had roots in the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century, which saw the built environment as a way to effect social change. The FSA saw cooperative, group design as a method of empowering poor tenant farmers and laborers and facilitating democracy in a region where the white elite had control over most resources.⁵¹⁴

The historical record does not reveal what Rev. Owen Whitfield and other sharecroppers argued with respect to this discussion about scattered or group homes, but STFU representatives suggested group projects to officials in Washington.⁵¹⁵ Most likely the sharecroppers on Stark’s committee favored group projects, although their first preference was to facilitate land ownership for families, not just housing. Many of the families who moved into the Delmo projects, Black and white, were union members, and they knew that living in a group setting would make organizing easier. This was precisely what landowners feared.

⁵¹³ Towle, *Delmo Saga*, 18 (Hudgens quote); Philip G. Beck to Walter E. Packard, 29 November 1939, f. “July 1939-June 1940,” box 230, Entry 51, General Correspondence, Records of the FHA, NARA-Chicago.

⁵¹⁴ Hise, “Roadside Camps,” 243.

⁵¹⁵ Manuscript, “Where My Possessions Lie: A Documentary Film on the Southeast Missouri Roadside Demonstrations of 1939,” f. “Documentary film projects, 1985-87, n.d.” Lorenzo Johnston Greene Papers, LOC. H. L. Mitchell said that he and F. R. Betton suggested the construction of housing villages when they went to Washington, D. C. in the spring of 1939. Mitchell had seen examples of such FSA housing in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Betton was insistent on including enough land to grow substantial gardens for food.

The previous summer, Rev. Whitfield had been one of the primary organizers of a privately funded resettlement project called Cropperville, in Butler County. It was owned by the recently organized Missouri Agricultural Workers' Council (MAWC), of which Whitfield was Secretary, and white organizer William Fischer, from Dorena in Mississippi County, was President. It was designed as a place of refuge for displaced sharecroppers, many of whom had participated in the 1939 demonstration. Each person contributed what they could to the survival of the community according to their individual talents. Cropperville welcomed Black and white farmers, but most were African American, reflecting the preference of many whites for segregated residential patterns and the wider range of housing options available to them. In fact, Blacks and whites within Cropperville lived some distance away from each other.⁵¹⁶ Figure 23 shows a memorial to the Cropperville residents. Figures 24 and 25 show different angles of an early Cropperville building.

Cropperville, like the La Forge Cooperative Farm where Rev. Whitfield had lived, was an interracial residential experiment, and it reflected the working-class solidarity among some Black and white farmers. It was also shaped by generations of tradition whereby African Americans established rural communities and towns in order to facilitate self-defense, economic independence, and self-governance, and create a living environment buffered from the humiliations of a Jim Crow society. Notably, Black towns and independent farming

⁵¹⁶ Steven John Ross and Candace O'Connor. *Oh Freedom After While*, DVD (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1999); O. H. Whitfield to Members of the Executive Board, Missouri Agricultural Workers Council, June 10, 1939, f. 3, box 41, Lorenzo Johnston Greene Papers, LOC; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 149-54. The STFU was affiliated with the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), which was part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In February 1939, UCAPAWA expelled the STFU, a result of long-term political differences. Most STFU members in the Bootheel, including Owen H. Whitfield, chose to remain with UCAPAWA, and formed the MAWC.

communities were examples of “planned communities” that existed long before the federal government established new ones under the New Deal.⁵¹⁷

Because individual, scattered housing would not serve the best interests of farm laborers, in early April the FSA approved Missouri Rural Rehabilitation (RR) funds to purchase land for three Delmo sites. By early June, officials were taking construction bids for nine sites - three for Black workers and six for white workers. The cooperative, community-oriented component was reflected in the project layouts. Each Delmo project had from thirty to eighty houses built in a closed geometric pattern, facing inward toward a common green space and utility, or community building. The South Wardell community, for example, resembled a baseball diamond with two branching cul-de-sacs, as shown in Figure 26. Other projects, such as North Wyatt and North Lilbourn, were rectangular, but the streets still encircled a central public green space. Adjacent houses often shared a driveway, which meant they were in close proximity to each other, facilitating neighborly communication. The community, or utility building, located at the center of each project, housed laundry facilities where women visited with each other while doing this domestic chore. There was a meeting room that housed civic activities, such as Women’s Club meetings, and it served a recreational role. Perhaps most importantly, it was where the elected community council met to discuss issues that affected the welfare of the residents.⁵¹⁸

The intended permanence of the homes was evident in the size and quality of the Delmo housing. They were 640 square feet, with three bedrooms, a kitchen that connected to the

⁵¹⁷ Cha-Jua, *America’s First Black Town*; Bethel, *Promiseland*; Janet Sharp Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Mark Schulz, “Benjamin Hubert and the Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life,” in *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction*, eds. Debra A. Reid and Evan P. Bennett (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 83-105. The history of Black towns, particularly in the twentieth century, is still an understudied topic.

⁵¹⁸ Smith, *Delmo*, 22-25; “80-House Labor Settlement Nears Completion,” *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), October 25, 1940; F. Brown, interview by Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2012.

combination living room and dining room, and a pantry and storage closet. There were four different floor plans, but each home had the same basic components. There was a small screened-in porch and a small stoop outside the front door. Each house was of frame construction, set off the ground on concrete piers with brick chimneys and shingle roofs. The walls were built of finished pine, and the houses were painted white on the outside. The houses were intended to endure well into the future.

Several additional features were geared towards ensuring families could live in the houses year round. There was a concrete food storage area under each house that could be accessed from within the house through a trap door, as seen in Figure 29. Having a storage space that protected food from the elements and from animals was critical for helping families get through the winter when there was little work. It also meant they would not have to spend meager funds to purchase food at high interest rates from plantation and country stores. Another significant part of the community design was the inclusion of “surplus land” which could be rented out, or used for cooperatively grown crops. This comprised about two-thirds of the acreage in each community and was separate from the large yard each house had for family gardens.⁵¹⁹

The Racial Politics of Project Siting: Black Workers’ Struggle for “Places to Live”

The housing designs for the Black and white communities were the same, but the construction of the South Wardell project revealed that Black projects were not welcome everywhere in the Bootheel. South Wardell, located a little over a mile south of the town of

⁵¹⁹ Towle, *Delmo Saga*, 18; Smith, *Delmo*, 22-4.

Wardell in Pemiscot County, was originally designated for Black workers. Wardell itself was nearly all white, but large numbers of African Americans had moved into the surrounding rural area during the migration of 1922-1923. Many of the sharecroppers who had recently become day laborers were desperate for decent housing. In January 1941, Black workers had begun applying to live in this community of eighty homes. The FSA halted this process, however, when local whites discovered the project was designated for Black, not white workers.

Prominent whites, mostly from Wardell, launched a political attack against Black occupation through a letter-writing campaign. Their opposition lay along two interrelated fronts. The first was a desire to keep African Americans relegated to marginal, temporary places within the landscape, both materially and symbolically, thus ensuring white supremacy and the territorial integrity of “white man’s country.” The second stemmed from a determination to prevent collective organization by limiting or controlling the spaces in which this could occur.

White opposition and intransigence from the white business and planter elite in these situations did not usually take the form of physical violence. In the Bootheel, a veneer of white civility shaped the public face of race relations beginning in the 1930s.⁵²⁰ Whites in Missouri were more likely to use economic retribution and political dominance in response to African Americans’ challenges to the existing racial order. Still, the possibility of physical violence was

⁵²⁰ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 11-12; Greene, Kremer, and Holland, *Missouri’s Black Heritage*, 174. Orville Vernon Burton, “Race Relations in the Rural South since 1945,” in *The Rural South Since World War II*, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 30-33. Burton notes that race relations could vary widely within the South. Wayne, *A New Plantation South*, 5. Wayne has helped fill the gap in studies of development and race relations in the Border South, particularly the “new Plantation South,” that part of the Old Southwest that was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In her study of Poinsett County, Arkansas, she argues that the rise of the STFU in this area was at least partly due to the fact that “businessmen-planters could draw on no local traditional power base to rationalize their authority.” According to Aretha Robinson, who grew up in a sharecropping family in Mississippi County, Missouri, her parents said conditions in the Bootheel were not “quite as bad” as they were further South. Aretha Robinson, interview by Heidi Dodson, May 31, 2012.

always just beneath the surface, and periodically it erupted. In 1939, for example, Robert Haynes was beaten during the sharecroppers' roadside demonstration. On January 23, 1942, Scottie Spears, an STFU member, was beaten at a meeting in Caruthersville. Two days later, on January 25, Cleo Wright, a Black mill worker, was lynched in Sikeston for allegedly attacking a white woman. Despite its presence, however, physical violence was not as prevalent as in the Deep South.⁵²¹

In the case of South Wardell, local whites gathered numerous petitions signed by all economic classes, but it was members of civic bodies like the Wardell school board, the Rotary Club, and churches that led the opposition. This flurry of letters and petitions was sent over the course of a few days to Missouri Senators Harry Truman and Bennett Champ Clark, Representative Orville Zimmerman, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and FSA officials.⁵²²

The language whites used in the press and in letters to public officials was very civil, avoiding racial epithets and acknowledging African Americans' right to decent housing and education, at least in the abstract. For example, W. H. Foster, President of the Wardell Rotary Club explained "we are not adverse to a housing project for negroes" but whites should have priority in their area. In order to justify African American exclusion from South Wardell, people like Postmaster P. E. Bussart drew upon a racialized narrative of regional development that

⁵²¹ Cantor, *Prologue to the Protest*, 168; "U.S. Intervention Asked in Mo. Case," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 28, 1942; Aubrey Williams to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 19, 1939, f. "Tenant Farming, 1939-1944," Box 1, Official File 1650, FDR Library; Interview no. 45, Robert Haynes, January 17, 1939, f. "Tenant Farming, 1939-1944," Box 1, Official File 1650, FDR Library; Capeci, *The Lynching of Cleo Wright*. For an understanding of the violence African Americans faced in other parts of the Delta, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Wayne, *A New Plantation South*.

⁵²² These letters are located in the following folders of box 414 of the FHA Records: "MO-21-160-02 Complaints," "RP-83-MO-21-432-Budget," "AD-MO-21-911-045," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

conceptualized the Bootheel as a frontier that white folks had cleared and settled. “They say that this is a white man’s country, settled years ago by white people, cleared and drained by white people, and will remain a white man’s country.”⁵²³ It was a refrain whites had echoed repeatedly since the turn of the century as the working class and elite fashioned themselves pioneers and visionaries in the “reclamation” of an “agricultural empire.” In some parts of the Bootheel such rhetoric was matched by white attempts to completely exclude African Americans, creating “sundown” towns, townships, and other jurisdictions. This was particularly true in counties that bordered the Ozark highlands to the west.⁵²⁴

Complete exclusion was attempted on a small scale with South Wardell, but in terms of the larger rural Wardell area, whites were most concerned with making sure the Black population did not exceed 20 to 25 percent because they did not want to build new schools. To this end, Wardell whites denied that any African Americans in the area needed homes or had been displaced, just as cotton planters had done two years before when nearly 1,500 people moved to the highways to protest their evictions. J. I. Burlison stated “if the Wardell Colony is used for a negro colony it will cause a great expense on the taxpayers of our school district to take care of those additional negro children that will have to be brought in from some other part of the state, as there are not enough negroes in our community to fill up the colony.” Oscar Fuller, a member of the Wardell Rotary Club, wrote that “all the negroes have got places and they would have to be imported in there, and the community does not want them.” O. A. Knight, a member of the

⁵²³ W. H. Foster to Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941; P. E. Bussert to Hon. Orville Zimmerman, February 15, 1941, f. “RP-MO-21-911-045,” box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵²⁴ Roy Godsey, “Southeast Missouri: An Agricultural Empire,” *Monthly Bulletin of the Missouri State Board of Agriculture* 21, no.10 (October 1923): 4; C. F. Bruton Real Estate and Investment Co., *The Modern Promised Land*, Southeast Missouri-Northeast Arkansas Promotions, SEMO; Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 232-235; Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 76, 106, 213.

Board of Education, objected because when African Americans moved into the area in earlier years, the State Department of Education “was continually demanding that we increase our expenditures for negro education and establish a High School.”⁵²⁵ By rhetorically erasing the role of African Americans in area development and by denying local Black workers’ need for decent housing and schools, whites from Wardell framed the potential South Wardell occupants as “imported” outsiders who had no legitimate claim to taxpayer resources.

African Americans in the Wardell and nearby Hayti area, after hearing about white efforts to exclude them from Delmo housing, quickly organized their own protest, which ultimately proved successful. Their ability to mobilize quickly was primarily due to the membership of many people in the Missouri Agricultural Workers’ Council, part of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA).⁵²⁶

Two petitions from February and March 1941 exemplify the demands of local Black workers and what they saw as their best strategies for pressuring the FSA. The first petition was sent in February by a committee composed of five Black farmers and laborers from the Wardell area: Thomas S. Terry, W. M. Cross, Mack C. Suggs, Isaac L. Wells, and George Janison. The second was signed by over one hundred of the “Colored sharecroppers, tenant-farmers, and day laborers of Pemiscot County,” with J. W. Littlefield signing his name first.⁵²⁷ Collectively, their

⁵²⁵ J. I. Murlison/Burlison to Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941. This letter appears to be signed J. I. Murlison, but it was likely a typographical error. Other correspondence suggests it was J. I. Burlison, a local planter; Oscar Fuller to Hon. Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941; O. A. Knight to Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941, f. “RP-MO-21-91-045,” box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵²⁶ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 160.

⁵²⁷ Thomas S. Terry et al. to P. G. Beck, Feb. 2, 1941, f. RP-MO-21-160-02 Complaints,” box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP; Petition, March 1941, f. “AD-MO-21-160-02,” box 414, “FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940,” Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

arguments focused on their status as citizens whose labor had been instrumental in developing the area, and they called attention to their political support of the Democratic Party. At the same time, they challenged the government's plan for resource distribution which was based on racial demographic proportions, and instead contended that it should be based on need, for "we have suffered most, we have suffered longest."⁵²⁸

Both letters convey the petitioners' acute awareness of the promise and hypocrisy of the federal government and Roosevelt's New Deal – not only the broadly professed goal "of this administration ...to render help to the group lowest down," but also specific promises of aid that came out of Rev. Owen Whitfield's meetings with government personnel in St. Louis the previous year. Frustration pervaded the petition headed by Littlefield, as they recounted that the only thing that kept them from undertaking another roadside protest was their confidence in Whitfield and his opinion that the government would come through for them "if given ample time and support." Their disillusionment with the government's treatments of African Americans came through in their parting words – if they were ignored, they would "depart from this county in a body on March 20, 1941," taking Black workers from other counties with them and "*once again* [emphasis added] this great American nation and the World shall know that this government of our United States of America, that preaches Democracy so loudly, has failed to practice its own preaching."⁵²⁹

⁵²⁸ Petition, March 1941, f. "AD-MO-21-160-02," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵²⁹ Thomas S. Terry et al. to P. G. Beck, Feb. 2, 1941, f. RP-MO-21-160-02 Complaints," box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP; Petition, March 1941, f. "AD-MO-21-160-02," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

There was, of course, a long litany of reasons these men and women would be disenchanted with the federal government. The policies of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration had contributed significantly to their current plight. But significantly, some of these men were of the age that they likely served in World War I and experienced segregation and discrimination within the military as well as violence and intimidation when they returned to their homes in the South. With World War II raging in Europe at the time of this petition, they articulated sentiments that informed A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement (MOWM) that would coalesce into the national Double V campaign the following year. Their threat to leave the county *en masse*, which took place at the same time the MOWM was being planned, illuminates the dialectic between national and local – how frustration with the New Deal and other failed promises played out in a local context. This interplay was also evident in Double V slogans, nationwide, that referenced the Cleo Wright lynching. Newspapers frequently called on readers to “Remember Pearl Harbor, but don't Forget Sikeston.”⁵³⁰

The letter written by Thomas S. Terry and four other men directly referenced their role as voters, demonstrating how the African American experience in the Bootheel departed from that of the Deep South. “The committee whose names appear as signatories to this petition, are and have been for many years, loyal democrats, supporting the democratic program in every instance. During the past Presidential campaign, this act of the administration [referring to FSA projects] was held out as an inducement to the colored voters of this vicinity to support this administration and was responsible in the swinging of a large block in that direction.”⁵³¹ In the Bootheel, as in

⁵³⁰Greene et al., *Missouri's Black Heritage*, 140-147; Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 43-44; 49-52; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 82-84.

⁵³¹ Thomas S. Terry et al. to P. G. Beck, Feb. 2, 1941, f. RP-MO-21-160-02 Complaints,” box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP; Petition, March 1941, f. “AD-MO-21-160-02,” box 414, “FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940,” Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

other parts of the country, some Black voters began to switch their allegiance from the Republican to the Democratic Party in the 1930s after becoming disenchanted with the Republican Party and hopeful about the possibilities of Roosevelt's New Deal. In this petition, they called on the government to fulfill its promises and drew attention to their electoral influence.⁵³²

The role of rural housing in Black freedom struggles has not received much attention by historians, but the location, quality, and ownership status of African American workers' homes significantly affected employment, family health, security and many other aspects of daily life. This was most poignantly expressed by Terry and his fellow petitioners when they wrote "Colored people of this section constitute less than 1% of the home owning class, and ...by reasons of this condition, such tenants are placed in a very subservient position, subject to the personal whims of the land owning class. Negroes who reside in this section are forced to inhabit the worst tenement houses which are *merely places to stay and not places to live.*" [Emphasis added] Littlefield and over 100 fellow petitioners reminded the FSA that they waited and suffered patiently, "crowding three and four families to a shack..."⁵³³

The demands of Terry and his contemporaries were about more than survival. By demanding "places to live" rather than places to "stay," they expressed a desire for permanence and the ability to exercise the rights of citizenship associated with being a resident in a particular place, including voting and obtaining an education. To "stay" was to be a temporary sojourner,

⁵³² Franklin D. Mitchell, *Embattled Democracy: Missouri Democratic Politics, 1919-1932* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1968), 124, 138.

⁵³³ Thomas S. Terry et al. to P. G. Beck, Feb. 2, 1941, f. RP-MO-21-160-02 Complaints," box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP; Petition, March 1941, f. "AD-MO-21-160-02," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

subject to the whims of plantation owners. Increased independence from landowners could provide some protection from eviction and the upheaval of constant moving. All of these demands were part of a larger, longstanding struggle of African Americans for autonomous space and community stability in rural areas.

Adam Holman, son of sharecroppers Abraham and Rosie Holman, recalled the toll that moving took on him, particularly when it came to education. “School was a thing that was very depressing in that particular time....We’d work on one farm this year, the next year you go to another farm and then probably the next year you go to another farm.” Many of the teachers in the rural one-room schools only had an eighth-grade education, and each taught from two to four grades. At Wyatt, however, Holman had one teacher, Charles Harris, who was known for his excellence. Holman recalled that “we didn’t have him every year, because if we moved away from that particular farm, we might have another teacher, or another group of teachers...So education itself was a problem.”⁵³⁴

When the Holmans moved into the North Wyatt project, around 1946, life stabilized to a significant degree. In addition to experiencing more constancy in education, Adam’s parents became more involved in civic activities. His father, he recalled, was a strong, quiet man, with a seventh grade education and a lot of common sense, who had moved from Mississippi, to Arkansas, and then Missouri in 1937. “He wasn’t very active in community things until approximately 1945, 1946, he started getting involved in that.”⁵³⁵ There is evidence, however, that Abraham Holman may have been involved in the STFU near Dorena in 1939.⁵³⁶ If so, this

⁵³⁴ Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ “Sharecroppers Continue to Fight,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28, 1939. This article discusses STFU organizer W. M. Fisher, who worked with Black and white sharecroppers around Dorena, in southern Mississippi County. It says “Two of Fisher’s colored companions, Abraham Holman and Robert Bailey, asserted that they had been taken

collective labor mobilization may have motivated his later political activity. After he moved into North Wyatt, he became a member of the North Wyatt community council, and by 1948 was a delegate to the Progressive Party convention in Philadelphia.⁵³⁷ Adam's mother, Rosie Sparks Holman, was a member of the Women's Club, and became involved in school desegregation efforts described in the next chapter.

There were times when Abraham Holman would move out to the countryside temporarily to take a sharecropping job, but he could always return to the security of his North Wyatt home. As a result, his family did not have to fear being evicted if they challenged the landowner. By the early 1950s, the Holmans owned their house. One reason the Holmans had moved so frequently was because Abraham would argue with landowners if he thought he was being cheated. His son recalled that at harvest time, his father would physically go to the gin to see what they were paying per pound for cotton. He also "paid attention to the radio, and he listened and he picked up information from people around." If there was a discrepancy between what the gin was offering and what the landlord was offering, "he went to the landlord and says 'Wait a minute. I saw over there on the paper, on the billboard, where it was thirty-five cents per pound and you paying me thirty-two cents, that ain't right.' So this is the way he got into what you call trouble

by the state highway patrol officers back to the cabin from which Holman had been evicted...." I have not found records for any other Abraham Holman in the region. Moreover, the U.S. Social Security Applications and Claims Index entry for Abraham's son, Elijah, indicates he lived in Dorena at some point. The application itself is not available online at Ancestry.com, but Elijah's birthplace is indexed as Dorena, Missouri [Marvell, Arkansas.] He was born in Marvell, but must have listed some early connection to Dorena. Given Adam D. Holman's description of Abraham's willingness to question authority, and stay informed about cotton prices, it would not be surprising if he was active in the STFU.

⁵³⁷ "Negroes Play Prominent Role at New Party's Convention," *Chicago Defender*, July 31, 1948. Abraham Holman is listed a Missouri delegate from Wyatt.

with them.” His father still got the money due him, but “at the end of the year...they’d tell him, we don’t want you next year.”⁵³⁸

Moving into a federally managed home could not completely remove the economic and physical risks of daily life in the South, but it was an improvement, and in the battle over South Wardell, workers knew this. Their activism paid off. Despite white opposition to the South Wardell project, the FSA did not veer from its plan to offer the homes to Black workers. As regional FSA director Phil Beck explained, they had committed to serving the needs of Black and white workers in the landlord-tenant meeting with Governor Stark the previous year. Moreover, FSA officials feared that if they gave into local pressure, it would jeopardize other Black projects. They did, however, appease local resentment by promising to build a project for white workers, which they named North Wardell. The agency’s decision was eased by the fact that Regional Administrator P. G. Beck met with large landowners privately and found that many were in favor of the project but did not want to publicly oppose the majority of Wardell residents.⁵³⁹ This cleavage reveals different class-based interests among whites. Businessmen, professionals, and average citizens – especially those living in small towns – preferred to limit the local Black population. Landowners, while unhappy with the idea of federally managed group housing, were in favor of having Black laborers nearby who could work in their fields.

⁵³⁸ Adam D. Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012.

⁵³⁹ P. G. Beck to C. B. Baldwin, 21 March 1941, f. “RP-MO-21-911-045,” box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

Leveraging and Defending Black Community Space: The 1941 Cotton Picking Strike

In the fall of 1941, landowners' fears that Black workers would rebel against low wages and white supremacy were realized when the South Wardell community council decided not to pick cotton until their wages reached \$1.50 per hundred pounds. Leaders consulted the African American FSA manager, Sam Douglas Greer, before taking action, and he told them "You are a free people in a free country, this is a matter between you and the cotton growers and...the Government cannot take sides in the issue."⁵⁴⁰

While the design of the Delmo housing projects reflected the philosophies of the FSA, residents shaped how the project spaces were used. Each community had an elected council that made decisions and recommendations for residents. The FSA project manager was on this council, and had veto power, so the residents did not have total control; but communities could often push forward with their own agendas.⁵⁴¹ In the case of South Wardell, the leaders of the strike, James E. Green and Rev. Mack, were members of the STFU, so their previous experience organizing undoubtedly informed their actions. However, residents' decision to withhold their labor was made independently by the community council, and it was not a planned STFU action. Multiple identities, then, intersected and shaped residents' decision-making. The creation of a group housing project provided fertile ground for the formation of new social networks and collectives. In addition to the community councils, the Delmo projects had women's clubs that

⁵⁴⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Sam Douglas Greer to Constance E. H. Daniel, 3 September, 1941, f. "RP-MO-21-000-900 Delmo Security Labor Homes," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵⁴¹ Thomas J. O'Donnell to John T. Stewart, 5 January 1942, f. RP-MO-21-160-02 Complaints," box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

played critical roles in each community's economic survival and social action. The residents' identification with South Wardell and North Wyatt as communities was further solidified when each incorporated as villages, becoming Homestown and Wilson City, respectively.⁵⁴²

The workers' refusal to pick cotton infuriated local cotton planters like O. H. Acom, who told African American camp manager Sam Douglass Greer to go back to the project and send "them 'dam Niggers" back to work." If they wouldn't go, he said the FSA might as well "put a fence around the dam colony [and] if they did not work for the \$1.00 per hundred they need not to expect to ever get work from the community at all." Acom thought the federal government should force workers into the fields. One of the conditions for living in the Delmo projects was that one male family member had to be a reliable wage earner who was registered as an agricultural worker with the U.S. Employment Service. This person was supposed to be available to work during cotton chopping and picking seasons. South Wardell residents clarified that they were willing to work, just not picking cotton.⁵⁴³ Their refusal to pick cotton was a strategically timed effort to raise wages, but there was a symbolic aspect as well. African Americans associated picking cotton with the hardships and humiliations of slavery and sharecropping. Fighting for a fair wage was their way of asserting their dignity as workers, distancing themselves from this past. They were challenging the "plantation mentality" embodied by whites who demanded Black subservience. Historian Laurie Green reveals how African Americans moving to urban areas like Memphis developed new conceptions of freedom in opposition to this

⁵⁴² Ibid; Minutes, Delmo Housing Corporation Board of Directors meeting, 18 October 1946, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU; Smith, *Delmo*, 64-67.

⁵⁴³ Carl D. Hudson to Marvin M. Gray, April 19, 1941, f. RP-83-MO-21-011-04 Delmo Labor Homes Applicants," box 414; Mr. and Mrs. Sam Douglas Greer to Constance E. H. Daniel, 3 September, 1941, f. "RP-MO-21-000-900 Delmo Security Labor Homes," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

mentality. It is important to recognize, as well, that African Americans developed new conceptions of freedom by rebelling on plantations, and by creating new community spaces off plantations in rural areas.⁵⁴⁴

During this strike, eviction, one of the retaliatory measures frequently used by landowners against workers who challenged their authority, did not pose a threat for those who lived in South Wardell because it was federally managed, and the workers were not breaking federal policies. The official policy of the FSA was to stay out of labor disputes. The workers stood their ground against area planters and pushed wages up to \$1.25 per hundred.

The following March, FSA Area Director John T. Stewart faced complaints about the strike from landowners at a Wardell Rotary Club meeting. Stewart replied: "We are not a labor board and we have absolutely nothing to do with setting wages and hours. The people who live on our camps are free American citizens; we have no power to compel them to do anything. We can only remove them from residence when they violate their agreement with us; when they fail to pay rent or when their conduct jeopardizes the peace and well-being of the colony."⁵⁴⁵

Cotton planter O. H. Acom's comment about how the FSA might as well put a fence around the project speaks to the way that the group design of the project could be both harmful and empowering for the workers. From Acom's perspective, if the workers would not meet his terms, there might as well be a fence to keep them in because they would not be able to find work from landowners. In this sense, the fact that the striking workers lived in a particular

⁵⁴⁴ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-14.

⁵⁴⁵ John T. Stewart to Thad Snow, March 31, 1942, f. 8, correspondence series, Thad Snow Papers, SHSMO-STL; Mr. and Mrs. Sam Douglas Greer to Constance E. H. Daniel, 3 September, 1941, f. "RP-MO-21-000-900 Delmo Security Labor Homes," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

housing project made them easier to identify and easier to retaliate against economically and perhaps violently. But the comment about the fence also indicated his frustration with the limits of his power to force workers to do what he wanted. In many ways his control stopped at the edge of the project.

With or without a fence, the intangible boundary marking the beginning of the project, dividing federal and private land, was always tenuous in its ability to protect workers and staff from retribution from local whites. In the case of the cotton picking strike, although the FSA policy was to remain uninvolved, African American manager Sam Greer was asked to resign by O. A. Schlegel, a member of the FSA at the local Sikeston office. Greer appealed to Constance E. H. Daniel, an African American senior administrative assistant in the Washington office, explained the situation, and was able to remain on the project.⁵⁴⁶

The residents were also vulnerable to violence from outside the project. The strike had begun Tuesday, and by Saturday there were threats against the residents. For two nights, the night marshal from the town of Wardell came into the project after midnight looking for Rev. James Green, who was the leader in this particular labor action. The residents knew that area law enforcement was part of the local white power structure and often served planter needs. They were worried about their safety, and when Rev. Mack, another community leader, asked Mr. Schlegel, an FSA staff member in the regional office at Sikeston, if the agency could provide any protection, he shook his head no. Schlegel was the same person who tried to get Greer fired. Left to his own devices, Greer installed a floodlight on the water tower. His letter to Constance Daniel suggests that some of the residents discussed armed self-defense because during the

⁵⁴⁶ Mr. and Mrs. Sam Douglas Greer to Constance E. H. Daniel, 3 September, 1941, f. "RP-MO-21-000-900 Delmo Security Labor Homes," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

strike, Greer went around the project “talking non-violence.”⁵⁴⁷ In April, the residents had elected a “foreman” who was “in the habit of carrying a pistol.”⁵⁴⁸

To a significant extent, the freedom of occupants was contingent on the individual project managers and decisions of higher FSA administrators. In this case, manager Sam Greer supported the right of the community to make a decision regarding its economic welfare. Greer had, that year, joined a local chapter of the NAACP, which was just getting off the ground in the region, and he undoubtedly recognized that labor and civil rights struggles were intertwined. At the same time, Greer’s management was influenced by his middle-class status and expectations. For example, he was known as “Marryin’ Sam” for requiring that unmarried couples living in the project tie the knot.

African Americans faced a precarious, possibly dangerous situation when they refused to pick cotton in 1941, but they had more power than they would have had on plantations and they used this strategically. Living in a group project where everyone knew each other made it easier to monitor who came in, and the inward facing design of the houses engendered a feeling of safety, of community solidarity. Still, the reality of the Jim Crow South was that there was no way to completely protect themselves from harm.

⁵⁴⁷ Mr. and Mrs. Sam Douglas Greer to Constance E. H. Daniel, 3 September, 1941, f. “RP-MO-21–000-900 Delmo Security Labor Homes,” box 414, “FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935–1940,” Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵⁴⁸ Robert W. Hawkins to Hon. Harry C. Blanton, April 11, 1941, f. “Migratory-83-MO-21_101,” box 414, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

Mrs. Henry's Rebellion

Although the FSA constructed the Delmo homes so that they would benefit workers, the agency was also paternalistic in how it managed communities. The project manager in each community, for example, had the power to override community council decisions. There was an assumption on the part of the agency that residents had to be taught how to work together, ignoring contemporary examples of working-class collective organization such as the STFU. This paternalism was also evident in the rules governing buildings in the projects. Residents had to obtain permission before they made any alterations to their homes. Rev. Mack, one of the first occupants of the South Wardell project, was in charge of monitoring the community for any unauthorized changes. In 1945, the FSA was particularly conservative about allowing changes because, as a result of political backlash against the New Deal, Congress ordered all FSA resettlement projects liquidated.⁵⁴⁹

In 1944, Mozetta and Lewis Henry moved into South Wardell with their family after their previous home on a plantation burned. Mrs. Henry quickly became frustrated with some of the limitations of their house, shown in Figure 27. As she explained, “you had this little black pot stove and you couldn’t brown no biscuits or nothing...I just got so sick of that.” The smoke from the heater also meant she constantly had to wash and iron the blackened curtains. She did not like the built-in cabinets nor the fact that there were no closets in the house.

Her neighbors informed her “that Rev. Mack was gonna make me move if I ...made any changes. I said, well, he got to do it cause I’m gonna make ‘em.” According to Henry, “he

⁵⁴⁹ Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, 184-86; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 134-36; Mozetta Henry, Juanita Henry, and Toni Powell, interview by Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2013; Smith, *Delmo*, 142.

would come every month and check to see if you done anything to the house.” One morning she got fed up. Her son was at home so she enlisted his help. They removed the pot stove and replaced it with a gas one, added a table and some chairs, and took out the cabinets with a hammer. Mrs. Henry’s next-door neighbor watched the whole process anxiously, sure that Henry would be evicted. When Rev. Mack and a government official came by to inspect the house, however, they complimented her on how nice it looked. Neighbors who had gathered to see what would happen soon started making changes to their homes.⁵⁵⁰

Mrs. Henry, by refusing to ask permission for the changes she made, asserted control over her family’s living space. For most of their lives, residents of the Delmo communities, as laborers and sharecroppers, had rented homes from employers. Landowner neglect, low wages, and the constant threat of eviction limited the control they had over their living conditions, including the quality of their housing. Delmo housing, on one hand, was a relatively stable place to live, but residents had to contend with FSA rules and restrictions. According to Mrs. Henry’s daughters, she had always been a trendsetter, and in this case she helped change the culture of fear that permeated the community and gave courage to others who wished to make changes to their homes. Mrs. Henry’s house at the time she was interviewed in 2013, juxtaposed with one of the original homes in the Morehouse project from 1941, shows how residents individualized what were originally standardized homes, and adapted them to meet their family’s needs.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁵⁰ Mozetta Henry, Juanita Henry, and Toni Powell, interview by Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2013. Mrs. Henry could not recall the exact year she made the changes to her house, but she did remember that one of the reasons the owners could not make changes was because the houses were going to be sold. This narrows the time frame to 1945, when the Delmo projects were liquidated by the FSA.

⁵⁵¹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 175-76; Mozetta Henry, Juanita Henry, and Toni Powell, interview by Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2013.

World War II – Instability and Activism

World War II ushered in both economic opportunity and instability for the Delmo residents. Many of the younger men were drafted into service, leaving women to handle the challenges of raising children, working in the fields, and maintaining their homes. The labor of these women and the men who remained were also mobilized by the federal government to work agricultural harvests in distant places like Arizona and Massachusetts. In June 1943, the FSA transferred management of migratory labor camps, including the Delmo communities, to the War Food Administration (WFA), part of the Office of Labor, where they remained until January 1945, when they were transferred back to the FSA.⁵⁵² Many residents desired migratory work, because it supplemented the seasonal work available in Missouri, but they were also pressured into it through federal policies that attempted to prevent them from seeking more lucrative defense work. Despite these constraints, many did find temporary work in industry, since the FSA did not stringently enforce rules that kept them in agriculture. This angered local planters. Even if workers returned from other jobs in time to harvest cotton, the white elite resented their mobility.

Local planters' resentment stemmed from their understanding that in order to live in the Delmo houses, residents had to be agricultural workers. They assumed that workers should be laboring in their fields. There were a number of requirements for living in the Delmo homes, set forth by the FSA when they were first built. One was that "family wage earners must be registered as agricultural workers with the Office of the U.S. Employment Service." And according to B. Mildred Nelson Smith, who worked as a home demonstration supervisor in the

⁵⁵² Smith, *Delmo*, 152.

projects, “in practice they had to agree to be available for work during the peak farming seasons, particularly during cotton chopping and picking seasons.”⁵⁵³

It was these requirements that smoothed over most planter resistance to group projects in 1940 when they were built. However, as the informal cotton picking strike held by South Wardell workers illustrated, the FSA often chose not to interfere in resident employment decisions, particularly if there was not a wait list for housing. From the FSA perspective, the agency’s goal was to create “a self-contained labor supply in southeast Missouri,” but it recognized that workers could not survive on season cotton chopping and picking. They had to have other sources of income. Thus, they were supposed to grow their own food, get jobs in nearby towns, travel to other parts of the country for different harvests, or work in the defense industry.⁵⁵⁴ If houses were empty, the FSA was not going to control what the residents chose to do for work. Hudgens said “it was assumed that if work was available and conditions comparable, the work [field work] would be accepted.” In others words, if the planters were paying competitive wages, they would probably not have trouble finding labor.⁵⁵⁵ When Orville Zimmerman, U.S. Representative for the region, complained about this, Hudgens clarified, “the only responsibility we assumed for these people was the management of these houses. We did not undertake to supervise where they worked except that, in general, they should be in agricultural work. We did not take any responsibility for either making them work or doing

⁵⁵³ Smith, *Delmo*, 30-31.

⁵⁵⁴ *Farm Security Administration*, Hearings before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to Investigate the Activities of the FSA, part 2, U.S. House of Representatives, 78th Congress, 1st Session, 635 (June 7-July 2, 1943) (statement of R W. Hudgens).

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 700.

anything that would prevent their working. We simply provided housing that would allow them a fairly decent place to live.”⁵⁵⁶

Finding other income was necessary for both Black and white laborers, but planters particularly resented Black workers leaving the area, even temporarily. Zimmerman complained “the other day, I saw a picture in St. Louis of a carload of our Negroes going from southeastern Missouri up to Joe Martin’s district in Massachusetts.” He continued: “I have been trying to get you boys to sell this stuff [Delmo projects] to the farmers, take the houses out to the farm where men will work, but you won’t do that.”⁵⁵⁷ The words Zimmerman used - “our Negroes,” – reflected the paternalistic sense of ownership many whites had towards African Americans in this region, especially when it came to labor.

Black Delmo residents utilized many different strategies to fight for economic and social freedom during the war. Some continued to be active in the STFU or UCAPAWA. Prominent businessman E. F. Raffety, a gin and alfalfa plant owner in Mississippi County, argued for disposing of the Delmo projects because “it has been a disappointment to this community, practically the whole project have signed up in the unions, which is very much against the interest of farmers in Mississippi County.” Senator L. Danforth Joslyn, from Charleston, complained that “some of these people in this project are spending their entire time in labor agitation. This community has become a nucleus of discention (sic) and disorder among the working class. A spirit has gradually grown up that has endangered the people and the welfare

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 720.

⁵⁵⁷ *Farm Security Administration*; Hearings before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to Investigate the Activities of the FSA, part 2 - House of Representatives, 78th Congress, 1st Session, 122, 152 (June 7-July 2, 1943) (statement of Orville Zimmerman).

of the community. Last Sunday in Wyatt there was a near race riot which I directly attribute to the existence of this enterprise.”⁵⁵⁸

The “spirit” Joslyn referred to was the determination of African Americans to challenge not only labor conditions, but also their roots in white supremacy. It is not clear what exactly precipitated this “near race riot,” at Wyatt, but shortly before this complaint Black and white UCAPAWA members in the Bootheel were organizing a wildcat strike to fight for 30 cents per hour wage for farm workers and a ten-hour day. The interracial organizing of Blacks and whites since the STFU took hold in the region in 1936 threatened landowners’ ability to keep wages low by pitting white and Black workers against each other.⁵⁵⁹

Charles Jackson, a long-time resident of North Wyatt and the surrounding area, remembered a fire in 1941 in the Black part of Wyatt, rumored to have been started because someone thought Blacks and whites were socializing, or perhaps organizing together, too much.⁵⁶⁰ I have not found any mention of the fire in the newspapers, but according to oral histories Wyatt does appear to have become a sundown town at some point after 1940. North Wyatt, the Delmo community, was built less than a mile from Wyatt, across Highway 60/62. South Wyatt, for white workers, was essentially built as a subdivision of Wyatt. Their separation was designed to reinforce segregation and discourage cooperation between the Black and white workers. In 1920, Wyatt was all-white. By 1930, after African Americans migrated into the area from further South, they built several churches and cafes in the southwest part of Wyatt, and

⁵⁵⁸ Smith, *Delmo*, 131-132. Smith transcribes in full letters from Joslyn and Raffety, May 27, 1942 and June 4, 1942, respectively that were sent to Rep. Zimmerman, and forwarded to the Department of Agriculture. The originals should be in the National Archives.

⁵⁵⁹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 167-169.

⁵⁶⁰ Charles Jackson and Joe Earl Lane, interview by Heidi Dodson, Wilson City, MO, January 23, 2013.

forty-four African Americans lived within the town boundaries.⁵⁶¹ In later decades, Wyatt became all-white again. When Preston Heard moved from Mississippi to teach in the Black schools, he recalled that there were “no black people in Wyatt. Black people either lived in Wilson City or in rural areas on farms. The only time you went to Wyatt maybe was to get some gasoline or some groceries.”⁵⁶²

During World War II, the Charleston chapter of the NAACP, which included members near Wyatt, also grew. This will be detailed further in the next chapter, but membership in the Charleston chapter expanded from the original fifty members who had joined by mid-1940 and reached a peak of over 500 in 1946. The membership included many education, ministerial, and business professionals, members of a Black middle class that developed in the 1920s and 1930s, but there were also significant numbers of tenant farmers and laborers. The increasing NAACP membership reflected the fact that the war years were a chaotic time in many respects for Black farm workers, but it was also a period of politicization and mobilization as a result of the battle for housing and fair wages, and the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom abroad while facing oppression at home. This disjuncture was brought sharply into focus, locally and nationally, when a mob of whites in Sikeston lynched Black mill worker Cleo Wright January 20, 1942, for allegedly assaulting a white woman.

The lynching had an enormous impact on African Americans throughout the region. Hundreds moved away from Sikeston, and undoubtedly hundreds more left the Bootheel for northern cities.⁵⁶³ It led to the formation of new NAACP chapters in the region, the first of

⁵⁶¹ Ancestry.com, *1920-1930 U. S. Federal Census*, Wyatt, Mississippi, MO.

⁵⁶² Preston and Bonnie Heard, interview by Heidi Dodson, Wyatt, MO, January 23, 2013.

⁵⁶³ Capeci, *The Lynching of Cleo Wright*, 28.

which was organized in Sikeston two days after the lynching. The NAACP also launched an investigation into the lynching.⁵⁶⁴ Residents of the Black Delmo community of South Wardell, representing themselves as “citizens and voters of the state of Missouri,” sent a petition to Governor Forrest Donnell, in which they requested that he send a special investigator to Sikeston to discover the identity of the perpetrators. They also insisted that law enforcement officials in Sikeston, who did not use their weapons to protect Wright, be suspended and charged in court for their role in aiding the lynching.⁵⁶⁵ The Wright lynching did not dampen black activism in the region. To the contrary, it mobilized the fight for equality. This energy was necessary because Delmo residents soon had a new battle when Congress ordered all FSA projects, including the Delmo homes, liquidated. Hundreds of Black and white farm workers, many of whom had suffered through eviction and homelessness in 1939, faced the prospect of again being forced out of their homes and communities, which had been important spaces for collective organizing.

“We Won’t Go Back to the Plantation”: Conservative Backlash and FSA Project Liquidation

On March 2, 1945, Bill Johnson, a white STFU member in the North Wardell Delmo community, wrote STFU President H. L. Mitchell in Memphis, asking for assistance. “the FSA seems to be fixing to sell out the homes up here both White and Black and they are storming me for petitions to rebel against it can you send me some petitions or some means of relife [sic]

⁵⁶⁴ “Missouri Forms 3 New NAACP Branches Since Sikeston Lynching,” press release, March 20, 1942, NAACP Papers, Box C103, f. 4, LOC; Capeci, *The Lynching of Cleo Wright*, 38-45.

⁵⁶⁵ John W. Mack et al. to Gov. Forrest Donnell, January 31, 1942, Forrest Donnell Papers, f. 3606, SHSMO-CO.

some way.”⁵⁶⁶ The battle that ensued over the survival of the Delmo Labor Homes was one of David versus Goliath, but remarkably the tenants in this struggle prevailed, aided by key political and social allies. The fight to hold on to their housing took place in the halls of Congress, but most importantly, it originated with the farm workers in the Delmo communities. The ultimate defeat of planter interests reveals the importance of looking at how top-down legislative actions, like the dissolution of the FSA, played out on a local level.

FSA programs, particularly the resettlement projects, had always had political opponents, but according to historian Sidney Baldwin, 1940 marked “a turning of the tide” against the FSA.⁵⁶⁷ By 1943, Congress had begun a series of investigative hearings of the FSA, held before the House Committee on Agriculture from May 11, 1943 to May 3, 1944. One of the committee members in charge of these hearings was Rep. Orville Zimmerman, from the Missouri Bootheel, whose interrogations revealed his frustration with the Delmo Housing Projects and the opposition of the landowners in his district. One question he directed towards Hudgens encapsulated the essence of what he, as a representative of delta planters, wanted: “Why don’t you sell the houses to farmers and move them to the farm and have the man located on the farm where he is going to work and have him *permanently fixed*. [Emphasis added] Why don’t you do that?”⁵⁶⁸

As a result of complaints from Zimmerman and other prominent men in the Bootheel, in March 1944, Lt. Col. Wilson R. Buie, acting Director of Labor, visited the Delmo communities.

⁵⁶⁶ Bill Johnson to H. L. Mitchell, March 2, 1945, roll 29, STFU Papers.

⁵⁶⁷ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 325.

⁵⁶⁸ Hearings before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to Investigate the Activities of the FSA - House of Representatives, 78th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1943), 721.

According to B. Mildred Nelson Smith, who worked in Wyatt and East Prairie as a Home Management Supervisor, she thought he was there to investigate complaints against her from a Delmo resident regarding approval of a medical procedure. As she recalled “What Nelson (referring to herself) did not know, and was too politically naïve to suspect, was that Col. Buie was there on a more significant mission. He came with a list of names of prominent planters, ginner, merchants, judges, and all politically powerful people in the area, with whom he was to discuss the status of the camps and their possible future. Congressman Zimmerman had given him the list.”⁵⁶⁹

Buie found that the predominant view among planters and ginner was that the Delmo communities had not increased their available labor supply, and that there was enough housing on plantations to take care of farm workers. Ronnie Greenwell, a planter and ginner, complained that “the housing as now occupied, shelters the breeders of all the isms,” undoubtedly referring to activism, communism and socialism. Judge Elgin Davis, a planter and ginner, said the residents “will not work at home, they go away to adjoining counties.” Several planters said they had gone on record in 1940 as preferring the scattered housing instead of group housing. Buie reported his findings to Colonel Philip G. Bruton, Director of Labor, who then communicated to Frank Hancock, the new Administrator of the FSA, that the projects “were a detriment rather than an asset.”⁵⁷⁰

In January 1945, the Delmo projects were transferred from the War Food Administration (WFA) back to the FSA, with the intention that they be sold.⁵⁷¹ On March 6, Congressman

⁵⁶⁹ Smith, *Delmo*, 134.

⁵⁷⁰ Smith, *Delmo*, 134-136. The three quotes in this paragraph are part of a report reprinted by Smith. The report is from Colonel Philip G. Bruton to Frank Hancock, April 10, 1944.

⁵⁷¹ Smith, *Delmo*, 139, 142, 146, 152.

Wayne Hays of Ohio, introduced H. R. 2501, to “authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to continue administration of and ultimately liquidate Federal rural rehabilitation projects...”⁵⁷²

This bill passed, and the FSA established conditions for sale that put the homes out of tenants’ reach. Either each project was to be sold in its entirety, or individual houses could be sold as long as the houses were moved off the premises onto private land within 90 days. Moreover, the terms of purchase required 20 percent down and payment within five years, definitely out of the financial reach of the farm workers.⁵⁷³

When the residents of the Delmo communities heard they might be displaced from the very homes that had been their refuge after evictions five years before, they fought back. Rev. David Burgess had in 1944 started working in the Delmo communities as a minister to farm labor, funded by the Board of Home Missions of the Congregation and Christian Churches. Burgess, along with H. L. Mitchell of the STFU, worked with the Delmo residents to fight the sale of the communities to wealthy landowners. Representatives from the different Delmo communities formed an Independent Tenants Committee to marshal support for their cause, and they obtained the signatures of 606 residents on one petition, as well as the support of some small businessmen and farmers on other petitions.⁵⁷⁴

At the end of March, 1945, six Delmo residents went to Washington D. C. to meet with legislators about their plight. Those who went from white projects were W. E. Davis from

⁵⁷² David Burgess, *Fighting for Social Justice: The Life Story of David Burgess* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 63; Mr. Hays, Committee on Agriculture, Congressional Record, House, March 6, 1945, p. 1829, 79-1 (1945) H. R. 2501, <http://congressional.proquest.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/congressional/docview/t19.d20.cr-1945-0306?accountid=14553>

⁵⁷³ Smith, *Delmo*, 146.

⁵⁷⁴ Burgess, *Fighting for Social Justice*, 55-57; Smith, *Delmo*, 150-151; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 174-175.

Kennett, Ralph Williams of Morehouse, and T. M. Barker from North Wardell. Lydia Banks represented North Wyatt and W. L. Echols represented North Lilbourn, two of three Black projects. H. L. Mitchell went with them as did STFU organizer W. A. Johnson, a resident of North Wardell.⁵⁷⁵

In addition to lobbying for Congressional support, Burgess, Mitchell, and the Independent Tenants Committee put together press releases and information sheets and distributed them widely among labor unions, the NAACP, the Urban League, and other progressive organizations across the country.⁵⁷⁶ John T. Clark, Executive Secretary of the Urban League of St. Louis, wrote to Frank Hancock of the FSA, protesting the dissolution of projects that “have contributed greatly in setting up corrections of one of the most vicious systems existing in any part of our country.”⁵⁷⁷ The NAACP spread the word to its many chapters and donated \$1000 to the effort to save the homes. Major newspapers in St. Louis and Memphis reported on the situation.⁵⁷⁸

Delmo residents found an ally in Missouri Senator Frank P. Briggs, who, in April 1945 introduced an amendment to the Agricultural Appropriations Bill, H. R. 2689, that would allow residents to buy their homes on reasonable terms, but it was killed in Committee. Senator William Langer of North Dakota and Representative Frank Hook of Michigan then each introduced bills. The Langer-Hook legislation and visits to Washington delayed the home sales.

⁵⁷⁵ Smith, *Delmo*, 151; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 175.

⁵⁷⁶ David Burgess to Roy Wilkins, March 23, 1945, box II-A311, Part II – General Office File, 1940, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 174.

⁵⁷⁷ Smith, *Delmo*, 150.

⁵⁷⁸ Roy Wilkins to David Burgess, March 26, 1945, box II-A311, Part II – General Office File, 1940, NAACP Papers, LOC; David S. Burgess to Roy Wilkins and Walter White, October 15, 1945, box II-A311, Part II – General Office File, 1940, NAACP Papers, LOC; Smith, *Delmo*, 151, 160.

Meanwhile, Burgess and Bishop William Scarlett of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri recruited a group of socially progressive businessmen who were willing to fund the purchase of the homes through the formation of what would become the non-profit Delmo Housing Corporation (DHC), which would then sell individual homes to families. Because the DHC was not officially incorporated, the Cooperative Foundation, headed by Sherwood Eddy, was the official bidding entity. The Cooperative Foundation had been central to the formation of Delta Cooperative Farm and Providence Farm in Mississippi. These were ecumenically backed private resettlement projects that started out as bi-racial, but became predominately Black.⁵⁷⁹

The Cooperative Foundation, as representative for the DHC, bid for all ten Delmo projects, but its bid, as well as most other bids for individual projects, were rejected for being too low. One exception was a bid by L. D. Joslyn and George Hunter Raffety, gin and mill owners, for the South Wyatt (white) project, called Pecan Grove. The Joslyn family had originally sold the project land to the FSA, but now that it had homes and infrastructure on it, they wanted it back in its newly developed form. Documents suggest that Joslyn and Raffety had been discussing this purchase with the FSA in June 1945, before bids officially opened in August. In fact, they had been trying to get the land and homes back in the control of local planters as early as 1942.⁵⁸⁰

Evidence is contradictory as to whether the group that would become the Delmo Housing Corporation actually bid on South Wyatt. B. Mildred Smith reprints two pieces of correspondence in her book, including one by Rev. David S. Burgess, indicating the group had

⁵⁷⁹ David Burgess to Friends, April 3, 1945, box II-A311, Part II – General Office File, 1940, NAACP Papers, LOC; Smith, *Delmo*, 152, 154-55, 159-60; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 175; Ferguson, “Delta Cooperative Farm,” 5-7, 93.

⁵⁸⁰ Smith, *Delmo*, 131-2, 148-49.

bid on all ten projects but lost South Wyatt to Raffety and Hunter's much higher bid. She also comments that they did not bid on South Wyatt. Historian Jarod Roll indicates that Rev. Owen Whitfeld tried to convince South Wyatt residents to pursue his own plan for them to buy their homes because he was against the role of H. L. Mitchell and the STFU in coordinating the sale of the homes to the Delmo Housing Corporation. Either way, given Raffety and Hunter's much higher bid, and the political clout they had, the outcome probably would have been the same.

The South Wyatt tract of thirty homes became a subdivision of the town of Wyatt, to which it was already adjacent. It is unclear whether any of the occupants, who had in May written to the FSA asking to be given a chance to buy their homes, ever got this chance. According to historian Jarod Roll, Joslyn and Raffety increased rental rates to \$20 a month after purchasing the homes, which farm laborers could not afford.⁵⁸¹

In early 1944, when rumors of FSA liquidation circulated, eighteen families in the Black community of North Wyatt expressed an interest in buying their homes. In November 1945, this desire became reality, when the FSA finally accepted the Delmo Housing Corporation's bid for \$285,000, marking a new phase in the lives of the communities' residents and a signal victory for farm workers' battle against the landowners who sought to control them.⁵⁸²

The battle against the sale of the Delmo homes demonstrated the power of Black and white workers and their allies organizing together against powerful planters. However, at every turn, Black workers also had to contend with white supremacy and fight for their share of federal resources, claim their right to move into predominately white areas, protect themselves from

⁵⁸¹ Smith, *Delmo*, 166-169; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 174-176. Roll indicates that South Wyatt was the housing project for Black workers, but in fact it was for white workers. North Wyatt was the project for Black workers, and they were part of the successful bid by the Delmo Housing Corporation. Later they incorporated and changed their name to Wilson City.

⁵⁸² Smith, *Delmo*, 144, 169; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 176.

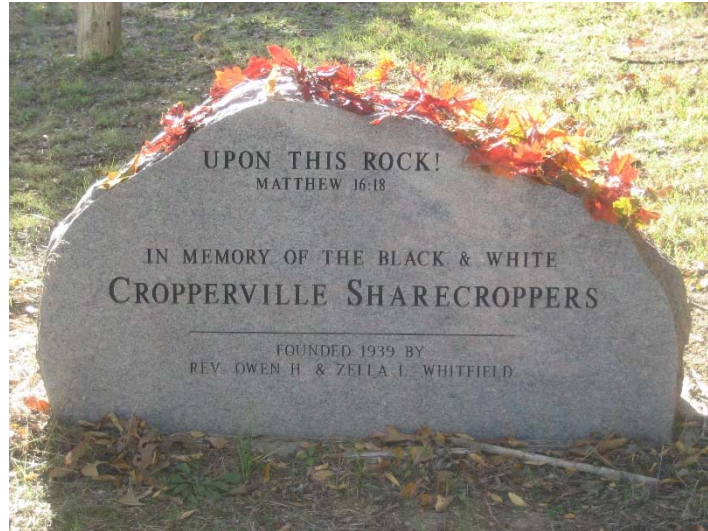
racial violence, and assert their status as citizens. These battles continued after 1945, but this time residents were home owners, with even more security than they had under the FSA. Still, they had to contend with the paternalism of a new landlord, the Delmo Housing Corporation.

By 1946, organized labor activity within the Delmo projects had declined, and NAACP chapters in the Bootheel had grown in number and size. The labor needs of agriculture were changing, and it became harder and harder to make a living as a farm laborer, sharecropper, and small farm owner. Most farm laborers in the Delmo projects only worked five months a year in the fields, unless they traveled to places like Berrien County, Michigan in the summer, where they picked cherries.⁵⁸³ Recognizing there was no future in agriculture for their children, and heartened by higher education desegregation battles in Missouri and other border states, many parents turned their attention to improving educational opportunities. Not surprisingly, the first post-war collective effort in this area emerged from the Delmo community of North Wyatt.

⁵⁸³ Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 286; Aretha Robinson, interview by Heidi Dodson, May 31, 2012. Aretha Robinson picked cherries and applies in Michigan in the summer with her children. Robinson was a resident of Pinhook, Missouri.

Figure 22. This map shows the location of the Delmo Projects in 1941.

Figure 23. Memorial at Cropperville in Butler County, Missouri.



Source: Photo by author, 2012

Figures 24. This photograph shows the front of an early Cropperville building. Today the site is being used as a Baptist youth camp.



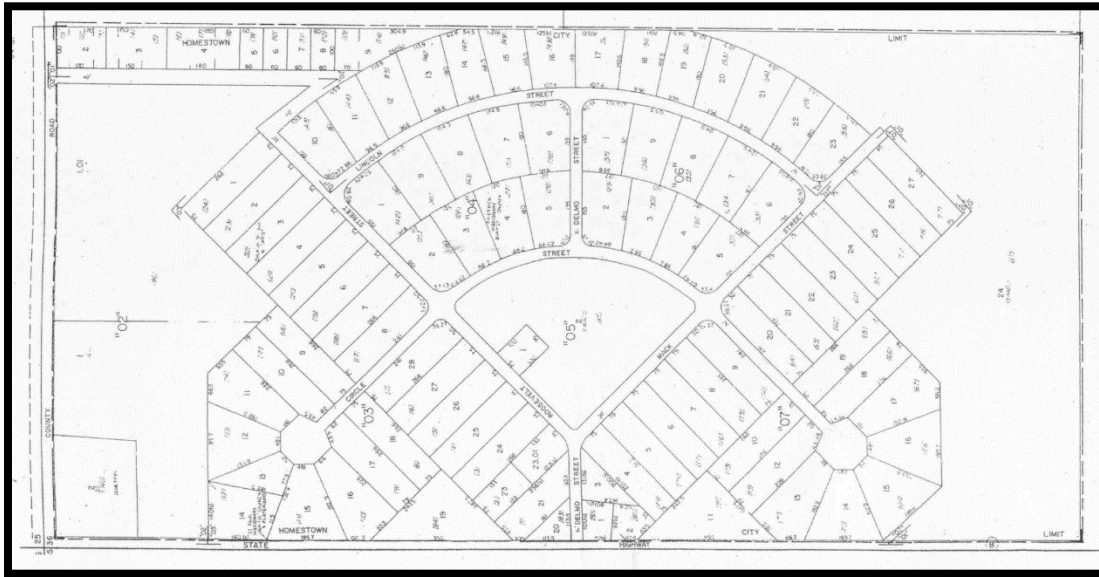
Source: Photo by author, 2012.

Figure 25. This photograph is of the back of the Cropperville building shown above.



Source: Photo by author, 2012.

Figure 26. This is a plat map of Homestown, Pemiscot County, Missouri. When it was first constructed as a Delmo housing project it was named South Wardell.



Source: "Delmo Community Center," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2008, https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/afam/2010/delmo_community_center.pdf

Figure 27 – This photograph is of Mozetta Henry’s home in Homestown, Missouri, 2013.



Source: Photo by author, 2013.

Figure 28. This is a photograph of a Delmo house at Morehouse, New Madrid County.



Source: John Vachon, November 1940, Library of Congress, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-061854-D.

Figure 29. This is a photo of the interior of a Delmo labor home at Grayridge, Stoddard County, MO.



Source: John Vachon, November 1940, Library of Congress, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-061841-D. The original caption indicates the home was in New Madrid County, but the Grayridge project was in Stoddard County.

CHAPTER 6

AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION BATTLES AND WHITE “GRUDGING COMPLIANCE,” 1941-1968

When black farm worker families put \$100 down on the purchase of their home in the Delmo communities in 1945, they gained a measure of security and autonomy that was even greater than what they had known during the FSA years, when they rented their homes.⁵⁸⁴ Making a living as a farm worker was extremely difficult, but owning a home provided families some stability - an anchor in the midst of insecure economic conditions. Homeownership provided a buffer against white economic retribution for civil rights organizing. Some of the occupants who purchased Delmo homes had been members of the Independent Tenants Committee, which had worked with the STFU and other allies to fight eviction by the federal government when Congress liquidated FSA projects. Energized by this battle, and cognizant of the fact that there was no future for their children in agriculture, parents turned their attention to fighting for an education that was equal to that enjoyed by white children.

The early epicenter for this phase of educational struggle in the Bootheel emerged in the North Wyatt Delmo community, where children were attending grade school in churches, a bus station, and even a saloon. In 1948, five members of the Women’s Club tried to enroll their children in the white elementary school in the nearby town of Wyatt, a bold action in the rural South. They were turned away because school segregation was still enshrined in the state

⁵⁸⁴ Parts of this chapter have been published in “Race and Contested Rural Space in the Missouri Delta: African American Workers and the Delmo Labor Homes, 1940-1951,” *Buildings & Landscapes*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 2016). The University of Minnesota Press and the Vernacular Architecture Forum have granted permission to reprint.

constitution. In response, North Wyatt residents turned to the NAACP and the threat of legal action in order to obtain equal school facilities required under Missouri state law.

This chapter argues that conflict over the built environment is central to understanding Black struggles for education in the Bootheel, as well as white resistance. Home, business, and land ownership provided some protection from economic retaliation by whites, which made direct action, NAACP membership, and legal action more tenable in this plantation-dominated rural region. As this chapter will show, control over community space and land in the communities of North Wyatt, Charleston, and Gobler, were central to civil rights struggles. Moreover, in the case of North Wyatt, African Americans' refusal to let school authorities co-opt their community spaces for classes for seven years strategically exerted pressure on local white school authorities, who were required by law to provide Black educational facilities. At the same time, in the years just before *Brown v. Board* and after, all-white school boards implemented a building program designed to forestall desegregation.

Education battles also reveal that in this Border South region, the pace of desegregation, and the buttressing of segregation through a Black school-building program, bore similarities to resistance in the Deep South. The absence of physical violence, and the lack of a private schools established for whites, however, sets the Bootheel apart from much of the rest of the South. The public tone of civility by white education officials resembled more closely that of Border South cities like St. Louis and Louisville.⁵⁸⁵ In 1966, an investigator from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted that the white power structure “seems resigned to change” and is “substituting

⁵⁸⁵ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*; Tracy Elaine K'Meyer, *From Brown to Meredith: The Long Struggle for School Desegregation in Louisville, Kentucky, 1954-2007* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville*.

grudging compliance for massive resistance.”⁵⁸⁶ At the same time, however, there was always an undercurrent of tension and potential for violence. This volatility was shaped by the fact that a substantial part of the white Bootheel population had moved up from other southern states.

African Americans had been fighting for educational resources in the Bootheel for generations, but their post-World War II activism marked a greater willingness to use legal and direct action. The NAACP became an important vehicle for legal action, but membership in this organization was grounded in community networks, highlighting the importance of place.⁵⁸⁷ In 1948, when Lucinda Crenshaw, Carryola Dickson, Georgia Jones, Otelia Scaife, and Rosie Holman tried to enroll their children in the white school, they launched an educational battle that moved from demanding equal facilities in the 1940s to pushing for desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁸⁸

This chapter examines the struggle for a quality education in a rural, Border South region, before and after *Brown v. Board*, by paying particular attention to diverse strategies employed by African Americans, and white forms of resistance. It begins in 1941, when farm workers were moving into the Delmo Labor Homes, and provides some background for the absence of a public

⁵⁸⁶ John W. Bennett, Report of Background Investigation for the Bootheel Open Meeting of the Missouri State Advisory Committee, March 21-25, box 7 “Records Relating to Special Projects, 1960-1970,” Office of the Staff Director, RG 453, Records of the Commission on Civil Rights, NARA-CP.

⁵⁸⁷ In 1920, for example, the staff of Lincoln School in Charleston, Mississippi County, drew upon respectability politics and appealed to local whites through the newspaper. They argued that “Education will do for the negro just what it does for the white an – make him a desirable citizen, a better American.” “Lincoln School Notes,” *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), January 15, 1920. In other instances, African Americans’ approach was more direct. In 1928, near Marston, in New Madrid County, white businessman Charles M. Barnes noted that “Agitation is being commenced having in view the removal of the negro school from the present site...to a more central location and...the construction of a better building.” When this “agitation” didn’t work, they circulated petitions. Diary Entry, Charles M. Barnes, September 5, 1928; November 18, 1928; March 6, 1932, diary series, Charles Merlin Barnes Papers, SHSMO-CO.

⁵⁸⁸ “Ask Negro Pupils be Permitted to Attend White School at Wyatt,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), September 21, 1948.

school for Black children in the North Wyatt area from 1941-1945. Next, it analyzes the establishment of the NAACP in the region during the same period. The NAACP became the primary organizational vehicle for educational struggles from the 1940s to the 1960s. Third, it analyzes North Wyatt residents' fight for the construction of a public school prior to *Brown v. Board*, including their refusal to let the Wyatt School District co-opt their community building for classes. This case never went to court, but some of the families involved were also participants in the fight for desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s. Next, this chapter describes some of the daily hardships experienced by African Americans as they pursued an education. Finally, this chapter discusses the desegregation battle, which involved lawsuits initiated by several rural districts, and includes an analysis of the Border South character of white resistance.

No School for North Wyatt Children: The Failure of the FSA and Local School Authorities, 1941-1945

When A. J. Hunter and his family moved into the North Wyatt Delmo community in early 1941, their physical living conditions dramatically improved, but educational facilities remained dismal. Classes were taught in a variety of overcrowded buildings, including the Church of God in Christ, Sanders Chapel A.M.E. (shown in Figure 30), the back of a segregated bus depot, and even in a local tavern owned by Shelton Partee.⁵⁸⁹ The Black population of Ohio Township, where North Wyatt and Wyatt were located, fluctuated in the early twentieth century, but by 1930 its population stood at 826 as a result of migration from the Deep South. In 1940,

⁵⁸⁹ "Negro Children Ask to Be Admitted to White School at Wyatt Last Monday Morning," *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), September 23, 1948; "No Fund to Build School for Negroes," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), September 22, 1948; Towle, *Delmo Saga*, 62.

that number had nearly doubled to 1,563, making African Americans over 50 percent of the township population.⁵⁹⁰ There were Black schools in rural areas some distance from Wyatt, but no dedicated building near Wyatt.

The FSA, when it purchased land to build North Wyatt, should have been aware of this issue. As Chapter Four discusses, the FSA intentionally located Delmo communities near towns and schools because the housing projects were small and were not intended to be completely self-sufficient in terms of services. In May 1940, Regional FSA Director P. G. Beck explained to Dr. Will W. Alexander that, "in connection with our construction of group labor homes, all of the tracts are especially located with reference to towns, schools, roads, and other community facilities and where the local demands for housing are most urgent."⁵⁹¹ The FSA, however, made no provisions for constructing a school. At the end of March, Frank K. Ashby, an attorney for the Wyatt School District No.8, complained to Senator Harry S. Truman about the effects of North Wyatt and South Wyatt (a white project) on existing facilities.

Ashby wrote that "seventy-five white and seventy-five Negro families" have moved into the area, "all of whom, white and black, want to go to school in the white neighborhood." The school district had proposed a bond issue to build a school for African Americans, but residents voted it down. Ashby asked that the federal government come up with a grant so the district could build a white and black school.⁵⁹² The district could only pass a bond up to \$12,601.10

⁵⁹⁰ Ancestry.com, *1910-1940 U.S. Federal Census*. Township population data were compiled by searching Ancestry.

⁵⁹¹ P. G. Beck to W. W. Alexander, May 1940, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935–1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵⁹² Frank K. Ashby to Hon. Harry S. Truman, March 27, 1941, f. "AD-MO-21-615 Delmo Project," box 414, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP. There were seventy houses built at North Wyatt and thirty at South Wyatt.

because of previous debt and a state limit on bond debt.⁵⁹³ FSA Camp Manager Carl D. Hudson had previously met with the school board, and alerted senior FSA officials to the situation. Meanwhile, School District No. 8 decided to use their entire bonding capacity to build a \$20,000 white school, a brick building with a cafeteria for hot lunches, shown in Figure 31. Referring to whites in the Wyatt School District, FSA manager Carl D. Hudson, wrote to a colleague that “They [school officials]...insist that it is their desire to erect two buildings of exact construction, but cannot finance the Project, and will therefore meet the needs of white families first.”⁵⁹⁴

According to state law, the district was required to provide a school for African American children, so in order to comply it should have divided the funds between a Black school and a white school, raising the rest through donations or subscriptions.⁵⁹⁵ Instead, officials chose, as one white resident noted, to build a school for the children who had been “reared in the district,” implying that African Americans were outsiders.⁵⁹⁶ Certainly the North Wyatt project was new, but African Americans had been living in the immediate area for at least two decades.

In the Bootheel, members of the white business, professional, and landowning elite were conscious of how their treatment of African Americans appeared to the rest of the state, and particularly after the 1939 roadside demonstration, to the rest of the country. Since the 1910s, the white elite had promoted the region as an attractive place of investment and as an agricultural Promised Land. The Bootheel was frequently mocked, or called to account by urban newspapers,

⁵⁹³ Marvin M. Gray to P. G. Beck, May 6, 1941, f. “AD-MO-21-615 Delmo Project,” box 414, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵⁹⁴ Carl D. Hudson to Marvin M. Gray, 29 April 1941, f. “AD-MO-21-615 Delmo Project,” box 414, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁵⁹⁵ Victor B. Harris to Henry V. Putzel, 17 March 1948, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, University Archives, Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries, 1/3/“Wyatt School District.”

⁵⁹⁶ “No Public School House for the Negro Children in Wyatt District,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, September 30, 1948.

such as the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Kansas City Star* for the way it treated African Americans. Of course, cities like St. Louis were also racially oppressive places, but urban white residents thought of themselves as superior when compared to people in the Bootheel.⁵⁹⁷

As a result, the white Bootheel elite and professional classes often expressed their good intentions towards African Americans publicly while doing little to change material conditions. The rhetoric they used, when justifying poor housing or schools, did not refer to African Americans as inferior, but instead emphasized protecting white interests in a way that attempted to downplay the significance of race. When the author of a newspaper editorial explained that the school district decided to use a school bond to build a school for children “reared in the district,” he was ostensibly privileging children who had lived in the area longest. In reality, this was a proxy for race. While some of the North Wyatt residents had not lived in the area prior to its construction in 1940, others had live on nearby farms and plantations. Some Black families, in the 1920s and 1930s, also lived in the town of Wyatt, and their children were certainly “reared in the district.”⁵⁹⁸

When the Wyatt School District decided to vote bonds to build a new white school, Mississippi County School Superintendent J. Abner Beck suggested that North Wyatt open its community utility building to classes in order to relieve overcrowding in the other locations. This would mean that African Americans would be holding classes in three private spaces: two churches and the community center. The community building, located at the center of the

⁵⁹⁷ “Threat of Secession in Dunklin and Pemiscot,” *Kansas City Star*, November 19, 1904. In this article, the press mocked the desire of Pemiscot and Dunklin Counties to secede from Missouri, after the state went for Theodore Roosevelt in the presidential election. The press characterized the region as the “rural, swampy terrain” where residents “masticate their slippery elm in peace and security, and enjoy their razor-back pork with none to intrude or make afraid.”

⁵⁹⁸ “No Public School House for the Negro Children in Wyatt District,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, September 30, 1948.

housing project, was a place to do laundry, take showers, and hold community council meetings and other activities. From the time of its construction, it was too small for the community's needs. In many of the Delmo communities, houses were used for offices and other administrative purposes because there was no room in the community building.⁵⁹⁹

The village's community council rejected Beck's proposition because, according to an FSA staff member who worked in North Wyatt, it would impinge on other needs and "there was also a more significant concern that the arrangement would prove a permanent one that would relieve the school board of its responsibility to provide a facility equal to that which was provided for the White children."⁶⁰⁰

The community council's decision is enormously significant, for it demonstrates how one Black working-class community, with few resources and advocates, asserted control over community space for its own activities, and also strategically used this control as leverage to push for civil rights. This strategy of pressuring the local government to provide a school was in part a product of the Bootheel's Border South location, chiefly its laws and political milieu. Without a state constitution that required Black schools, the school district would have felt no pressure to comply. Enforcement of this law was inconsistent, at best, but Black communities used it to push for better schools. The degree to which the Missouri Department of Education put pressure on school districts to comply with the constitution varied over time.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁹ Smith, *Delmo*, 22–25.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁰¹ "Information Regarding the Proposed Bond Issue of \$56,000," *Missouri Herald* (Hayti, MO), August 7, 1931. In 1931 the Missouri Department of Education threatened to withhold financial aid for the construction of a white high school in Hayti if the district did not build a 4-5 room brick school building for African Americans. At that time, 155 students were being taught in a one-room school.

The issue of school overcrowding was a problem in some of the white Delmo communities, but at least there were white public schools in the vicinity of these communities. In Kennett, the Ely School District complained that there was no room for the new white students, and local residents were not willing to raise taxes. In response, the FSA came up with \$15,000 to build a combination community and school building.⁶⁰² In other districts, children from the white projects integrated into existing white schools. It is not clear why the FSA did not contribute funds to the construction of a black school near North Wyatt. They were not taking a stand, like the North Wyatt community, to pressure the local school district to build a school. More frequently, the FSA accommodated the white power structure. In other parts of the South, the agency constructed black schools in RA and FSA resettlement communities.⁶⁰³

Black schoolchildren in the North Wyatt area continued to attend school in local churches, and parents and teachers made the best of trying conditions. Having to utilize private community spaces for public education was part of the double tax African Americans had paid for generations. Not only did private spaces have to function as public spaces, but the buildings were paid for by African Americans while their public taxes were directed towards white schools.⁶⁰⁴ Community members did the best they could to adapt the space they had. One resident, who attended elementary school in Sanders Chapel, recalled that teachers put up a

⁶⁰² Telegram, C. B. Baldwin to P. G. Beck, March 29, 1941, f. "RP-MO-21-000-900 Delmo Security Homes General," box 414; Memorandum, Acting Director, Resettlement Division to C. B. Baldwin, July 26, 1941, P. G. Beck to C. B. Baldwin, May 14, 1941, f. "RP-83-MO-21-432 Budgets," box 414; P. G. Beck to C. B. Baldwin, May 14, 1941, f. "AD-MO-21-615 Delmo Project," box 414, "FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935–1940," Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

⁶⁰³ Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 136. According to Holley, the RA and FSA constructed schools "when necessary." For example, the FSA built a seven-room school for African Americans at the Mileston, Mississippi farm resettlement project. See Wood, "The Roots of Black Power."

⁶⁰⁴ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 154-156.

temporary partition to separate classes in the sanctuary from the front of the church, where community women cooked hot lunches. Because all the elementary school children could not be accommodated in this church, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) was used as well. Each church held classes for four grades.⁶⁰⁵

NAACP Growth during the 1940s

In 1940, a year before Black farm laborers moved into the North Wyatt Delmo community, the NAACP took root in Charleston, eight miles away. In September 1939, William L. Pickens, NAACP Director of Branches, contacted Rev. C. L. Williams, pastor of Perry Chapel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, and informed him “the St. Louis and Kansas City branches of the Association want to tour Missouri and try to organize new branches to join the fight for general, and especially for educational equality of Negro citizens as citizens of the State.” Pickens’ efforts were part of a drive by the national office to increase membership throughout the rural South.⁶⁰⁶

By February 1940, Rev. Williams had put together an executive committee, which was tasked with recruiting the fifty members required for a branch. The executive committee included many education, ministerial, and business professionals, members of a small Black middle class that had developed in the 1920s and 1930s. One-third of the committee was composed of women.⁶⁰⁷ Rev. Williams and his wife Rosanna, like most of the committee, were

⁶⁰⁵ F. Brown, interview with Heidi Dodson, October 28, 2012.

⁶⁰⁶ William Pickens to Rev. C. L. Williams, September 27, 1939, f. 8, Box I – G107, Part I – Branch Files, 1910-1947, NAACP Papers, LOC.

⁶⁰⁷ Report of the Election of Officers of the Charleston, Missouri branch, f. 8, Box I-G107, Part 1 – Branch Files, 1910-1947.

not from the Bootheel. Rev. Williams grew up in Springfield, Missouri. Later, he and Rosanna lived in Cass and Clay Counties, where he was originally a Baptist minister, before moving to Charleston. Marshall Currin and Jacob Harris were both business owners in Charleston. Currin, who owned a café, had migrated from Halls, Tennessee in the 1920s.⁶⁰⁸ Both Currin and Williams were actively involved in assisting sharecroppers in the 1939 demonstration.⁶⁰⁹ Harris, a grocery store owner, came from Mississippi. Lemmie Jones ran a boarding house out of her home with her husband Richard, who was a school teacher. They were also from Mississippi. Three teachers were on the committee: Myrtle Pettigrew, Daisy Bowden, and Priscilla Ophelia (P. O.) Wesley. Pettigrew and Bowden were connected to landowning families in the Wolf Island part of Mississippi County. Wesley lived near Hayti, in Pemiscot County, and was interested in organizing an NAACP chapter there. She was a widowed school teacher from Lexington, Mississippi, and like thousands of families from the Deep South, had moved to the Bootheel with her husband in 1923.⁶¹⁰

Fred Coleman was a tenant farmer, and briefly a landowner, who was working for the WPA in 1940. He and his wife Rachel may have purchased their land in 1934 as members of the National Federation of Colored Farmers. It appears they lost their land, however, because by 1935 they were living in the rear quarters behind Jacob Harris's house in Charleston. Fred had

⁶⁰⁸ Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "C. L. and Rosanna Williams," Charleston, Tywappity, Mississippi, MO, p. 11B; Ancestry.com, 1930 U. S. Federal Census, "Charles and Rosanna Y. Williams," Pleasant Hill, Cass, MO, p. 20B; Ancestry.com, 1920 U. S. Federal Census, "Marshel and Sadie B. Curren," Halls, Lauderdale, TN, p. 5B.

⁶⁰⁹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 99; "Persecuting the Sharecroppers," *St. Louis Argus*, January 20, 1939.

⁶¹⁰ Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Jacob Harris," Charleston, Tywappity, Mississippi, MO, p. 18B; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Richard D. and Lemmie Jones," Charleston, Tywappity, Mississippi, MO; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Ophelia Wesley," Braggadocio, Pemiscot, MO, p. 18B; Priscilla Ophelia Wesley obituary, *Democrat Argus* (Caruthersville, Mo), July 26, 1957, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=65043335&ref=acom>.

joined the STFU in by 1937, and may have been involved in the 1939 roadside demonstration.⁶¹¹

George Lucas was a farm laborer born near Belmont in the Wolf Island area of Mississippi County. He was a World War I veteran, and in 1940 his wife Mary supported them as a cook in a private home. Finally, Dr. W. A. Fingal lived in Cape Girardeau but worked in Charleston. He eventually moved to Cairo, Illinois and was President of the NAACP chapter there in the 1950s when the organization fought for school desegregation.⁶¹²

Most members of the executive committee, then, were more financially secure than the majority of African Americans, who made their living as farm laborers or sharecroppers. The general membership of the Charleston branch, however, was more diverse than the executive committee in terms of class. There were significant numbers of tenant farmers and laborers. At least ten of the early members, including Houston Turner, Fred Coleman, Braxton Taylor, Joseph Carter, and Albert Barbee, had been members of the STFU, or had participated in the 1939 roadside demonstration.⁶¹³ Charleston was one of the few towns in the region with a significant Black population. In 1940, there were nearly 1,500 Black residents, which was about 28 percent of the town population.⁶¹⁴ The small size of the middle class, however, meant that an NAACP

⁶¹¹ Fred and Rachel Coleman, 1940 U. S. Census, Charleston, Mississippi, MO, 18B; North Spur Local 174, President, report 18 Feb 1937, roll 6, STFU Papers; Fred and Rachel Coleman, deed of trust, book 116, page 209, Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston, MO. Fred Coleman was also a member of UCAPAWA after it expelled the STFU membership. See Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 170.

⁶¹² Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "George and Mary Lucas," Charleston, Mississippi, MO, 23B; George Lucas death certificate, January 17, 1947, Mississippi County, MO, no. 1842, Missouri Death Certificates, 1910-1964, <https://sl.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/deathcertificates/>; Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Abathus Fingal," Cape Girardeau, Cape Girardeau, MO, 10A; Kerry Louise Pimblott, "Soul Power: The Black Church and the Black Power Movement in Cairo, Illinois, 1969-74" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012), 88-99.

⁶¹³ North Spur Local 174, President, report 18 Feb 1937, roll 6; Braxton Taylor, Charleston local, July 1937, roll 5; Joseph Carter and A. W. Scott, Monthly Report of Membership and Fees, Pinhook Local, August 26, 1938, roll 10, STFU Papers; Johnnie F. Moore, et al. to Gov. Lloyd Stark, March 27, 1939, f. 1939, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, SHSMO-CO.

⁶¹⁴ Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, Charleston, Tywappity, Mississippi, MO.

chapter would not have been sustainable without a more diverse membership in terms of class, and initially, geography.

Membership in the Charleston branch expanded from the original fifty members who had joined by mid-1940 and reached a peak of over 500 in 1946. At least two violent incidents spurred the increase in membership, as well as the establishment of branches in other locations in the Bootheel. The lynching of Cleo Wright in Sikeston, in January 1942, prompted thirty people to join the Charleston branch that year, bringing their membership to 110. It also prompted the formation, or re-activation of branches in Sikeston, Poplar Bluff, and other locations.

In 1943, membership in the Charleston branch nearly doubled to 200 members, when the branch invited Black St. Louis attorney Sidney R. Redmond to speak. In addition to interest in teacher equalization suits, which were being pursued on a state level, Black Charleston area residents were outraged by the “brutal handling” of a local minister and his wife by police officers. The NAACP hired Joslyn and Haw, two prominent white local lawyers, to represent Rev. O. E. Woods and his wife, but “the case was dismissed because of insufficient funds.” In 1944, Charleston membership increased to 273 members, which included eight youth.⁶¹⁵

. The increase in membership reflected the growing working-class membership sharecroppers and laborers joining the organization. Unfortunately, there are no membership lists past 1943, and no surviving branch activities reports from 1945 to 1950 for Charleston. State Conference annual reports, however, indicate that under the leadership of Marshall and Helen Currin, the branch thrived. In 1946, the Charleston chapter in Mississippi County was the largest in Missouri outside of St. Louis and Kansas City, consisting of 515 members.⁶¹⁶ Without

⁶¹⁵ Annual Report of Branch Activities, 1943, Charleston, MO, f. 4, Box II-C270, NAACP Papers, LOC.

⁶¹⁶ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 82-84; Lucille Black, Branch Membership Report, 25 October 1946, Missouri State Conference of Branches, part 26C, roll 10, Papers of the NAACP.

membership lists, it is difficult to judge the involvement of North Wyatt residents in the NAACP. In the first few years, there were at least two members, Houston Turner and Lee Lane. The involvement of the NAACP in the North Wyatt school battle, however, suggests that between 1945 and 1948, many families in this community were members, or became aware of the organization through mass meetings.

North Wyatt, Education Battle, 1947-1951

While NAACP membership was expanding throughout Mississippi County, and the Bootheel region, parents in North Wyatt became increasingly fed up with the fact that the local school district had not built a school for area children. The issue had been raised in 1941, when the FSA constructed the project, but over the course of five years the local school district, and the county superintendent, had done nothing except suggest that residents use their community building for additional classroom space. In the intervening years, the NAACP had been involved in educational battles in other parts of the state, and had experienced some success. The prominence of these educational battles undoubtedly inspired and emboldened residents of North Wyatt.⁶¹⁷

In the fall of 1947, community women took the leadership role and asked DHC business manager Harris D. Rodgers to raise the issue of a new school with the rest of the Board. At that time, there were 225 African American students squeezing into a church and tavern for classes.⁶¹⁸ Over the next two years DHC Board members met with the local school board and

⁶¹⁷ Greene, Kremer, and Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage*, 166-169.

⁶¹⁸ Minutes, BOD, September 14, 1947, f“Minutes, 1945-1948,” box 1, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU; Towle, *Delmo Saga*, 62.

County Superintendent J. Abner Beck. They made little progress, because the Wyatt School District was still paying off the white school. In March 1948, the school district could legally approve \$6,000, which had been paid off on the bond for the white school, but a building would cost at least \$20,000.

Responses to this dilemma revealed differences of opinion between Delmo Board members, on how to handle the situation. In March, Delmo Board member Edwin Coleman, a cotton planter from Scott County, suggested that the residents supplement the \$6000 from a bond issue with \$4,000 in public subscriptions from Wyatt area African Americans, and \$10,000 in private donations. Thus, he supported the idea that Black working-class families, barely making a living by seasonal farm labor, help pay for a school that should have been funded by the taxes they had been paying for years.

Not all Delmo board members agreed with Coleman's position, and they decided to contact the State Board of Education. Bishop William Scarlett had also contacted Dr. Will W. Alexander about the possibility that the Rosenwald Fund, which was well known for its rural school building program in the South, could provide assistance. Unfortunately, by that time the Rosenwald Fund had been liquidated. It had assisted in a minor way with a few schools in Missouri during the 1930s, but because Missouri was a border state with a relatively small Black population, it did not receive much attention from the organization.⁶¹⁹

County School Superintendent J. Abner Beck, as he had done seven years before, suggested that North Wyatt use its community building for classes. The community council again refused. In March, Harold Hanke, a member of the Delmo Board of Directors, sought a

⁶¹⁹ Minutes, Board of Directors, 21 November 1947; Minutes, Board of Directors, 23 January 1948, f. "Minutes, 1945-1948," series 1, box 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU; Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 1-6, 139, 283.

legal opinion from St. Louis attorney Victor B. Harris, who was his law partner. Harris looked into whether the 1938 *Missouri ex. rel. Gaines v. Canada* decision or the 1945 state constitution provided legal grounds to force the local school board or the state to provide a school.⁶²⁰ Harris responded that according to state law, if the local school board did not comply with educational requirements for Black schools, “such school district shall be deprived of any part of the public school funds...” This meant there were grounds to file a lawsuit. Moreover, the Wyatt School District would not be able to use lack of funds as a defense, since they were legally required to divide funds between Black and white schools. The bond issue from 1941, then, should have been allocated accordingly.⁶²¹

Harris went on to note, however, “as a practical matter there are serious objections to bringing such an action (lawsuit).” He was undoubtedly referring to possible retribution from local whites. Harris suggested pressuring the state to withhold funds without going through the courts.⁶²² The Board contacted the State Department of Education, but in June 1948, the Department responded that there was nothing it could do unless the county implemented school district consolidation, which would make them eligible for additional construction funds.⁶²³ The Department also erroneously assumed that the residents of North Wyatt had not been paying property taxes and thus were supposedly less deserving of aid.

⁶²⁰ Memorandum, Harold C. Hanke to Victor B. Harris, 24 November 1947, f. “Wyatt School District,” Box 3, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU.

⁶²¹ Victor B. Harris to Henry V. Putzel, 17 March 1948, f. “Wyatt School District,” Box 3, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Memorandum, Harold C. Hanke to Victor B. Harris, 30 June 1948, f. “Wyatt School District,” Box 3, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU.

No government body, then, between 1941 and 1948, was willing to take responsibility for providing North Wyatt area children with a decent school. The local school district assigned responsibility to the FSA, and then used bonds to build a white school. The FSA also erred in not forcing the issue with the local school board or coming up with funds. The local school board later assigned responsibility to the state because of its limit on bonds. State education officials said a school was the responsibility of the local district. The case points to the inefficacy of a state constitution that promised school facilities without ensuring enforcement.

The people of North Wyatt grew increasingly frustrated. Members of the Women's Club reached a tipping point on Monday September 20, 1948. That morning, Lucinda Crenshaw, Carryola Dickson, Georgia Jones, Otelia Scaife, and Rosie Holman decided to take matters into their own hands. They walked their children, lunch pails in hand, from North Wyatt to the white elementary school at the edge of the nearby town of Wyatt, and tried to enroll their children in the school. They were denied permission on the grounds that the state constitution of Missouri forbade African American and white children from attending school together.⁶²⁴ The action of these women was extremely courageous and was a direct challenge to white supremacy that risked physical and economic retribution. Notes from a Delmo board meeting suggest that the

⁶²⁴ "Ask Negro Pupils be Permitted to Attend White School at Wyatt," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), September 21, 1948; "No Fund to Build School for Negroes," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), September 22, 1948; "Negro Children Ask to Be Admitted to White School at Wyatt Last Monday Morning," *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), September 23, 1948; "The Constitution and Separate Schools," *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), February 15, 1945. Technically the Missouri State Constitution, revised in 1945, stated that "Separate schools shall be provided for white and colored children, except in cases otherwise provided for by the law." The latter part of this statement was added to accommodate U.S. Supreme Court decision *Missouri ex. rel. Gaines v. Canada* which had ruled in 1938 that Lloyd Gaines should be admitted to the University of Missouri Law School because the state did not provide an equivalent school for African Americans. See Article IX, 1(a), *The Constitution of the State of Missouri*, Article IX, 1(a), p. 119, Lloyd L. Gaines Collection, University of Missouri Digital Library, <http://digital.library.umsystem.edu>.

women were threatened with arrest for disturbing the peace. Their efforts were reported in the local press, ramping up the pressure on the Wyatt School Board.⁶²⁵

Rosie Sparks Holman and her husband Abraham moved to Missouri from Arkansas in 1937. Rosie was originally from Marvell, Arkansas, in Phillips County, and Abraham was from Louisville and Noxpater in Winston County, Mississippi. According to Rosie's son, Adam, his mother tended to be the kind of person who provided support to others, like his father and her friends, from behind the scenes. Clearly, however, in 1948 she chose to take a more public stand. Lucinda Greyer Crenshaw was the leader of the attempt to desegregate the white elementary school. She moved up to Missouri from Lee County, Arkansas with her parents. Her father, Robert Greyer, was a member of the Wyatt UNIA division in the late 1920s, and her brother-in-law, Milton Crenshaw, was involved in the 1939 roadside demonstration. Georgia Eggleston Jones was born in Scobey, Yalobusha County, Mississippi. Otelia Johnson Scaife, like Rosie Holman, was born in Marvell, Arkansas. She and her husband Louis moved up to Missouri in 1924. Carryola Dickson was from Clarksdale, Mississippi. Most of the women did not have an extensive formal education, but they had all moved to Missouri in search of a better life and better education for their families.

The women's attempt to integrate the white elementary school, six years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, put their educational battle on the radar of the state and national NAACP. The Missouri NAACP State Conference of Branches was already scheduled in St. Louis, where Gloster B. Current, Director of Branches and Field Administration for the national office, was attending. Immediately after, he traveled to Charleston and spoke to an

⁶²⁵ Committee Minutes, 5 October 1948, f "Minutes, 1945-1948," box 1, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU.

audience of 300 at an NAACP mass meeting. Shortly thereafter, in a letter to the President of the Missouri State Conference of Branches, he wrote: "I spoke in Charleston, Missouri on Monday October 4, and had an opportunity to look into the Wyatt school situation. The branch there is raising money to file a suit and the National Office Legal Department is interested in the case. I suggest that the State Legal Committee supervise this suit and take it on as a state project in conjunction with the local branch. This could be the first step in the implementation of the educational program adopted by the conference."⁶²⁶

It is difficult to ascertain what type of planning preceded the actions of the Women's Club. Adam Holman, whose mother, Rosie Holman, participated in the integration attempt, recalled that the women made the decision on their own without consulting with the community council or the NAACP.⁶²⁷ What is certain is that the women had been meeting in the community building for years, where they quilted together, listened to guest speakers, and discussed issues of concern to their community. While such activities also took place in churches, the community building provided a space where women from different denominations could gather together. What is likely is that the women had been discussing the education issue from the time they brought it to the Delmo Board of Director's attention in 1947, or before. By 1948, seeing that little progress had been made, they decided it was time to move things along. After the women went to Wyatt, a white teacher told them the government was working on the issue, but Otelia Scaife commented to a newspaper reporter "you know how long that takes."⁶²⁸

⁶²⁶ "To Take Wyatt Case to Court," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), October 5, 1948; "Negro School Problem May Go to Court," *Enterprise-Courier* (Charleston, MO), October 7, 1948; Gloster B. Current to Rev. L. L. Haynes, October 6, 1948, Missouri State Conference of Branches, Papers of the NAACP, microfilm, part 26C, roll 10.

⁶²⁷ Adam Holman, interview by Heidi Dodson, September 30, 2012.

⁶²⁸ "No Fund to Build School for Negroes," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), September 22, 1948.

The national NAACP at this time was transitioning toward a direct attack on segregation, but a variety of political factors and differences of opinion among African Americans kept the Association from committing to this strategy. Instead, from 1948 to 1950, the NAACP decided to attack discrimination but leave the remedy open to either equal facilities or desegregation. In other communities across the country, at that same time, similar cases were developing that would ultimately become part of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case. In rural Clarendon County, South Carolina in March 1948, Rev. J. A. De Laine and others filed a lawsuit against their school district because African American children did not have equal bus transportation. The case was dismissed in June based on a tax jurisdiction issue, and a year later in 1949 Thurgood Marshall convinced De Laine to pursue an attack on segregation. In Topeka, Kansas, the local NAACP chapter petitioned the school board to desegregate elementary schools and filed a complaint in federal court in 1951.⁶²⁹

The actions of Lucinda Crenshaw and other women, and the community's willingness to pursue legal action, raised tensions in the Wyatt area. It also revealed even further fractures within the Delmo Housing Corporation Board, and ultimately the Corporation's tendency toward accommodation to keep the peace with local whites. When the DHC Board met September 27, 1948, members were concerned because the Corporation was being publicly criticized. Harris Rodgers, along with E. P. Coleman, were from the Bootheel and were more racially

⁶²⁹ Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 138-39; Joseph A. De Laine Jr., "Briggs: South Carolina's Bold Step That Led to Brown," in *Remembering Brown at Fifty: The University of Illinois Commemorates Brown v. Board of Education*, eds. Orville Vernon Burton and David O'Brien (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 188-89; Orville Vernon Burton, Beatrice Burton, and Simon Appleford, "Seeds in Unlikely Soil: The Briggs v. Elliott School Desegregation Case," in *Toward 'the Meeting of the Waters': Currents in the Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina*, eds. Vernon Burton and Winifred B. Moore, Jr. (University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 176-200; Douglas O. Linder, "The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Trial: An Account," <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/brownvboard/brownaccount.html>.

conservative. They again suggested using the North Wyatt community building because the school board had offered to repair and equip the building for use by 50 schoolchildren (out of 200). Dr. W. Wilder Towle moved that they give it consideration, but there was no second. Abraham Holman, a resident of North Wyatt, and husband of Rosie Holman, was present at the meeting and indicated the North Wyatt community council did not support this option. Rev. Charles Wilson, of Grace Settlement House in St. Louis, was a staunch advocate of North Wyatt residents and favored legal action. His support of the community is why, when North Wyatt later incorporated, they took the name Wilson City.

Despite Holman's indication that North Wyatt did not support renting their community building, the DHC Board put together a statement to be released to the press indicating that the Corporation would be willing to rent the building for no more than one year while the school board built an adequate school, providing local residents agreed. These statements were then published in the local newspapers in the Bootheel. Essentially, the Board compromised because of the criticism leveled at them. They had also been told that the situation "might result in organized opposition to the people of the [North Wyatt] project in the matter of employment, etc." and "if [the] situation gets out of hand, it will be regretted." Meanwhile, Rodgers and Coleman resigned from the DHC Board over the issue, although Rodgers later came back. By making this public statement, however, the Board was placing the burden of opposition squarely on the North Wyatt residents and undermining their resistance to giving up their community building.

Toward the end of 1948, a couple of representatives from North Wyatt, after meeting with Bishop William Scarlett, agreed to rent the community building temporarily, but they did not abandon their pursuit of legal action. They were also quite firm in their direct negotiations

with the school board, rejecting the Board's first offer and demanding at least partial coverage of heating costs and janitorial work in addition to rent.⁶³⁰

It is difficult to gauge any divisions that many have existed among African Americans within the North Wyatt community, or in the wider area, over the attempt to desegregate the white elementary school versus renting the community building. There were the same concerns that existed in other communities across the rural South: fear of retaliation from whites; worries about how to pay for legal action, when many families were struggling to make a living; and different opinions on whether to push for equal facilities, or integration, when the latter option probably meant a loss of jobs for teachers and stressful experiences for students. Whatever differences of opinion may have existed, residents presented a united front to local school authorities and the Delmo Board.

The North Wyatt case never went to court, primarily due to lack of funds. Residents managed to scrape together enough to hire lawyers from Cape Girardeau and St. Louis, but they needed support from the Missouri NAACP Conference of Branches. The Missouri Conference professed its willingness to assist. It voted to make the case their number one priority in 1949 and to raise money for the lawsuit's support, but did not follow through. Acknowledging their lack of action at the end of 1949, they again vowed support, but insufficient funds were also an issue on the state level. The threat of a lawsuit, however, maintained pressure on the local school board. In 1950, the Wyatt School District finally passed a bond issue to build a Black school, and legal action against the district was abandoned.

The Booker T. Washington School was built in 1951. It was a four-room school that housed first through eighth grades. If students passed the exam to continue past eighth grade,

⁶³⁰ Minutes, Board of Director Meeting, November 22, 1948; Minutes, Board of Director Meeting, December 27, 1948, f. "Minutes, 1949-1950," box 1, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU.

they attended Lincoln High School in Charleston. Preston Heard, a teacher at Washington School, and current owner of the building, recalled that the school was constructed outside the city limits of Wyatt, so if laws to desegregate became a reality, Wyatt would avoid compliance. The same year that Washington School was built, the House Education Committee of the Missouri General Assembly approved a bill, by a significant margin, to end segregation in public schools. It was not the first time such a bill had been written, but it was the first time it was approved and sent to the floor. Ultimately it failed in the Senate, but House support reflected the fact that there was some political support in Missouri for school desegregation, unlike in the Deep South.⁶³¹ Higher education had desegregated in Missouri and Catholic schools in St. Louis desegregated in 1948. Change was on the horizon.⁶³²

Desegregation and the Black School-Building Program of the 1950s

In anticipation of desegregation, and in response to the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision, Black school-building became one of the primary means white officials in the Bootheel used to avoid integration in subsequent years. African American children had, for decades, squeezed into one-room rural schools and churches. Then, in the 1950s, at least thirteen new

⁶³¹ Committee Minutes, 5 October 1948, f “Minutes, 1945-1948,” box 1, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU; Minutes, 11 December 1949, Missouri State Conference of Branches, Papers of the NAACP, microfilm, part 26C, roll 10; Minutes, Board of Directors, 20 November 1950, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, University Archives, Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries, 1/1; Gary Kremer and Brett Rogers, *African American Schools in Rural and Small-Town Missouri*, Office of Historic Preservation, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, 2002; “Lawmakers Again Tackle Mixed School Issue,” *Norfolk (VA) Journal and Guide*, March 3, 1951. Towards the end of 1948, the North Wyatt community council did allow the Wyatt School District to rent their community building, while still pursuing legal action, but they negotiated for advantageous terms.

⁶³² Cultural Resources Office, City of St. Louis, “A Preservation Plan for St. Louis: Part I: Historic Contexts,” <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/Part-I-Education.cfm>

schools were constructed in the six-county region, including a new high school. At least ten of these school were built in 1954 or after. The actual number was probably higher, especially if additions to existing buildings are included.

This response, and minimal integration at the high school level, made the Bootheel an outlier in Missouri. After the *Brown v. Board* decision was issued by the Supreme Court in 1954, state officials in Missouri were fairly responsive to the ruling, taking a different path from former Confederate states. News from Jefferson City, the state capital, indicated “Leaders in Missouri’s education system expressed little surprise today.” Hubert Wheeler, the state commissioner of education, reported that he had not heard of any violent opposition, although there was some apprehension about reactions in two parts of the state that had “Deep South” attitudes about segregation: the Bootheel, and the “Little Dixie” area, in the central part of the state along the Missouri River.⁶³³

Desegregation occurred more smoothly in Missouri than in most of the South, but it was still resisted in St. Louis and elsewhere. The Bootheel lagged behind much of the state, however, by ignoring compliance with *Brown v. Board*, for as long as possible. Full integration did not occur in many places until 1968, a chronology more closely associated with the Deep South.⁶³⁴

The motivation behind building new schools, was to try to satisfy African American demands for a better education by attempting to live up to the principle of “separate, but equal.” It was too little, too late, and of course segregation was inherently unequal, but the school districts were willing to go to great expense to forestall what they saw as a social disaster. In

⁶³³ “Missourians Not Surprised,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, May 20, 1954.

⁶³⁴ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 42-43, 55; United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Survey of School Desegregation in the Southern and Border States*, 1965-1966 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 33, 42-43.

several cases, when school districts built new schools, they located them on the same campus as white schools. In a preservation survey conducted in 2002 by historians Gary Kremer and Brett Rodgers, documenting the history of extant, former African American school buildings, this was interpreted as a forward-thinking action. Supposedly, these school districts were looking ahead, planning for integration. Perhaps there was an element of truth to this, if school districts were accounting for what they considered to be the worst-case scenario. But their immediate strategy was to prolong segregation as long as possible. In order to do that, they made a pretense of appearing to provide separate, but equal facilities.

One way districts tried to obscure segregation, was to name new schools in relation to an existing white school, so that the Black schools did not have an obvious, independent identity. In 1956, for example, the Holland School District in Pemiscot County, built a new six-classroom school called Northside Elementary. A new white school, called Central Elementary, was finished in January 1959. These schools were on the same campus. Similarly, in the Steele School District, also in Pemiscot County, East Elementary School was built for African Americans in 1959 on the same campus as Steele Elementary, the white school. In these cases, the names of the Black schools were directional, in relation to the white school, reflecting a certain assumed subordination on the part of whites.⁶³⁵

Most school construction in the 1950s consisted of Black elementary schools, but in New Madrid County a new Black high school was built in 1958. It was named Lilbourn East High, to distinguish it from the all-white Lilbourn High. It was located, however, in the Black town of Howardville. For years, Travis B. Howard, the founder of Howardville, and a former principal

⁶³⁵ "Plan for Desegregation of the South Pemiscot School District R-V," f. South Pemiscot R-5 [Missouri], box 5, Records Relating to a Study of the Desegregation of Southern Schools, Office of the General Counsel, RG 453, Records of the Commission on Civil Rights, NARA-CP.

of O'Bannon School in New Madrid, tried to change the name to Howardville High School. White school officials did not want to draw attention to the fact that it was segregated by connecting the school name with the town name. Finally, in 1965 the name was changed to Howardville High. White school officials also kept the Black high school from publishing a yearbook, because, in an era of desegregation, it would “disturb the tranquility of peaceful living.”⁶³⁶ One edition was published in 1959, after the school had been operating for a year, but that was the last and only one. It is not clear whether Howard or other families in the area pursued desegregation of New Madrid or Lilbourn High School. One former student at Howardville recalled that their school building was as good as, or better than, the white schools, so they did not care about integrating. They had a great deal of pride in their school and in their town.⁶³⁷

The extent of Black school construction in the 1950s is listed in the table below. This data may be incomplete, as it only references extant school buildings listed in the 2002 Department of Natural Resources survey and schools that were part of 1960s desegregation lawsuits.

⁶³⁶ Vanessa Frazier “City of Howardville, Missouri,” Personal files of Vanessa Frazier, Howardville, Missouri.

⁶³⁷ Vanessa Frazier “City of Howardville, Missouri,” Personal files of Vanessa Frazier, Howardville, Missouri; Vanessa Frazier, interview by Heidi Dodson, Howardville, MO, October 25, 2013.

Table 8. Black School Construction in the 1950s in the Missouri Bootheel ⁶³⁸

Location or Name of Black School	County	Estimated Construction Date	Year of Integration
Gobler	Pemiscot	Mid-1950s	Closed 1964
Northside Elementary	Pemiscot	1956	1965
East Elementary	Pemiscot	1959	1965
McCarty Unit #2	Pemiscot	1957	Data unavailable
Hodgins	Pemiscot	1954	1963
St. Matthews	Pemiscot	1959	Data unavailable
Willoughby School	Dunklin	1952; addition 1964	1967
Lilbourn East/Howardville High	New Madrid	1958	1966
Parma	New Madrid	1960	1966
Deventer	Mississippi	Early 1950s; expansion 1963	Closed 1967-1968
Pinhook	Mississippi	1959	1966
Perryman School, or Pinhook #2	Mississippi	Early 1950s	Data unavailable
Booker T. Washington	Mississippi	1951	1968-1969

Note – all are grade schools except for Lilbourn East/Howardville High

⁶³⁸ Gary Kremer and Brett Rogers, *African American Schools in Rural and Small-Town Missouri*, Office of Historic Preservation, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, 2002; ⁶³⁸ f. South Pemiscot R-5 [Missouri], box 5, Records Relating to a Study of the Desegregation of Southern Schools, Office of the General Counsel, RG 453, Records of the Commission on Civil Rights, NARA-CP.

With many school districts implementing a building program for Black grade schools, parents who supported desegregation tackled the issue of high school integration first. This was likely to garner less white resistance than if they targeted elementary schools. Moreover, the distance many students had to travel to attend a Black high school was a major impediment to education. Even if students were able to make this journey, their high school curriculum was inferior compared to the white schools, making college preparation more difficult.

Limited High School Desegregation, 1954-1956

Sikeston and Kennett were the only towns in the Bootheel to successfully implement some high school desegregation immediately.⁶³⁹ In September of 1954, twenty Black students started classes at Sikeston High School, instead of traveling to Charleston sixteen miles away, to attend Lincoln High School. Lincoln School in Sikeston, a combination elementary and junior high, only went to the tenth grade.⁶⁴⁰ Soon after the *Brown v. Board* decision, Sikeston school superintendent Lynn Twitty told a local newspaper that “such a ruling had been more or less anticipated among those in the educational field.” He expected “little difficulty” in making this transition in Sikeston, although he thought it might take some time.⁶⁴¹

In Charleston, desegregation met more resistance. African Americans made no attempt to desegregate in 1954, but on August 2, 1955, the Charleston Branch of the NAACP, led by President Marshall Currin, met and voted to file two petitions. The first was with the Charleston

⁶³⁹ “School Bells Toll Death for Jim Crow,” *Washington Afro-American*, August 31, 1954.

⁶⁴⁰ “School Bells Toll Death for Jim Crow,” *Washington Afro-American*, August 31, 1954; Eugene Speller, interview by Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012.

⁶⁴¹ “School Segregation Unconstitutional,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, May 20, 1954.

School Board, asking that four students be allowed to enroll at Charleston High School. The other was a joint petition filed with five rural school boards and County Superintendent J. Abner Beck. While they were preparing the petitions, someone leaked the information to the Charleston School Board. The Board asked the NAACP and Lincoln School Parent Teacher Association officers to meet with them August 16. What followed was an intense discussion that ended in a standoff. The Charleston Board members argued that they did not have enough space to accommodate the high school students. According to Currin, the members said “if we could be sure that our children would continue to attend the Negro High School, they would add additional buildings, subject matter and teachers to bring it up to the standard of their own.” This was reflective of the strategy that they, and other school boards across the region used for grade schools.

The Board apparently recognized, however, the serious intent of the NAACP, so later that night members decided to allow African American juniors and seniors to attend Charleston High School, “as facilities will permit,” when school started in September.⁶⁴² The Board announced the decision in the newspaper, and the following night, August 19, local white citizens held a mass meeting at the high school to discuss the issue. The NAACP also held a mass meeting with parents and high school students on August 21, in order to encourage juniors and seniors to register at Charleston High School on the following two days.⁶⁴³

Currin was worried about what the students would face when they entered school on September 5. He explained: “We don’t know how much resentment is in this town, nor do we

⁶⁴² “School Board’s Order Ending Segregation in Charleston’s High School Rouses Protests,” *Sikeston (MO) Herald*, September 1, 1955.

⁶⁴³ Marshall Currin and Theodosia J. Emory to Gloster B. Current, August 21, 1955, NAACP Papers, Part 3, Roll 1.

have any way of knowing if there will be any trouble. We do know that most of our white citizens are from further South and we do feel that more of them are pro-segregationist than are anti-segregationist.”⁶⁴⁴ The uncertainty of white reactions was characteristic of life in the Missouri Bootheel for African Americans. Because it was a Border South region, with white citizens who were from the Midwest and the Deep South, challenges to white supremacy could go relatively smoothly, like they had in Sikeston, result in economic backlash, or could erupt in violence. The course of events was highly dependent on locality, Black and white leadership, and the influence of whites who had migrated from further South.

Currin was right to be worried. On August 22, 1955, over twenty Black students enrolled in the previously all-white Charleston High School. In response, two separate white protest groups formed in opposition to the school board.⁶⁴⁵ On August 26, someone placed a cross in the front yard of the school board president’s home and set it on fire. The windshield of another board member’s car was smashed with watermelons.⁶⁴⁶ Apart from these incidents, however, there does not appear to have been an organized opposition to desegregation, or at least not one that was organized in a publicly visible way. Whites did not target African Americans with physical violence, but as was typical in the Bootheel they responded with economic retribution. One student who enrolled lost his job and another, employed by Kroger, was threatened but not fired. The manager of Kroger was also threatened. Currin noted that most of the intimidation

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Theodosia J. Emory and Marshall Currin to Gloster Current, August 26, 1955, part 3, roll 1; Theodosia J. Emory, copy of press release, August 23, 1955, part 3, roll 1, Papers of the NAACP. Emory’s press release indicates twenty juniors and seniors combined enrolled in Charleston High School on August 22, 1955. A St. Louis Post-Dispatch article on August 27, 1955 reported twenty-seven students, eleven seniors and sixteen juniors, enrolled. Some additional students may have enrolled on the 23rd.

⁶⁴⁶ “Race Bias Causes Cross-Burning in Charleston, MO,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 27, 1955, clipping enclosed in NAACP Papers, part 3, roll 1.

had been directed towards whites, and “as long as they are fighting among themselves we won’t be too concerned.”⁶⁴⁷

As a precautionary measure, however, Currin asked Gloster B. Current if the national office had a representative who could be on hand September 5, the first day of school. The NAACP national office sent Mildred Bond, National Field Secretary, to Charleston on August 29 and 30, to talk with parents and advise them on how to handle the first day of school.⁶⁴⁸ Bond had been working in Hoxie, Arkansas, a small town where the school board unanimously voted to integrate at the beginning of the split-term school year in July. What began as peaceful integration in Hoxie changed when a *Life* magazine essay focusing on Hoxie drew attention to the situation, and segregationists across the state rallied against integration. A resulting lawsuit was the first instance where the U.S. Department of Justice intervened to uphold the *Brown v. Board* decision.⁶⁴⁹

In Charleston, the first day of school went fairly smoothly, according to Currin and fellow NAACP secretary and teacher Theodosia Emory, despite resentment and tension simmering among local whites. Preston Heard, a teacher who moved to Charleston in 1961, recalled hearing stories of whites throwing bottles, eggs, and other items at the Black students. His father-in-law, Lee Lane, transported high school students to Charleston from the Wyatt area. Heard also said the students chosen to desegregate the school were those who would not fight back if harassed. He recalled: “You just took it and went on if you wanted to stay in school,

⁶⁴⁷ Theodosia J. Emory and Marshall Currin to Gloster Current, August 26, 1955, part 3, roll 1, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁴⁸ Gloster B. Current to A. P. Marshall, August 26, 1955, part 3, roll 1, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁴⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, s. v. “Desegregation of Hoxie Schools,” by Jerry Vervack, last modified February 29, 2016, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>.

because they was always waiting for an excuse to put you out of school.”⁶⁵⁰ Aretha Myles Robinson, one of the first students to integrate Charleston High, recalled that there was fighting. “Some of the children was very, very nice and some was really, really rude. You just about had to fight every day. And it was terrible, it was a terrible experience. And you know back then, blacks and whites wasn’t getting along at all. When we started to the school the teachers was pretty nice. But the kids were so rude. I didn’t never get into a fight, but so many kids got into fights every day. They would pick at you, and that made it bad. Some kids can stand to be bullied and some kids can’t.”⁶⁵¹

Transportation remained segregated. The Black students from North Wyatt and the surrounding rural area were taken to Charleston by Lee Lane, but they were dropped off at Helen and Marshall Currin’s café. There, the students met with students who lived in town, and they all walked together to Charleston High. They had to walk on one side of Main Street to avoid white harassment from whites on the other side. According to Heard, Lee Lane did not take the students up to the school, for fear that whites would break out the windows. Helen Currin intervened by talking to the school superintendent, however, and arranged for Lane to deliver the students safely directly to Charleston High.

Aretha Robinson [then Aretha Myles], pictured in Figure 32, lived in a rural community called Concord, about five miles south of Charleston. Lee Lane’s route did not extend that far, so if her dad could not take her to school, she had to walk. The white school bus, however, came right by her house. She waited for this bus, and the driver stopped and picked her up. Everything went smoothly, for a while. She recalled, “They picked me up for three days, ...three

⁶⁵⁰ Preston and Bonnie Heard, interview with Heidi Dodson, January 23, 2013.

⁶⁵¹ Aretha Robinson, interview by Heidi Dodson, May 31, 2012

days, and then he [bus driver] came, the third morning he got off the bus, he said, and closed the door behind him, and said ‘Ma’am, I’m sorry I can’t pick you up this morning.’ And I said ‘Can’t pick me up?’ he said ‘No, he said, uh, I got orders not to pick you up this morning, or else I’ll lose my job.’” It was the Superintendent, John Harris Marshall, who had given the bus driver those instructions.⁶⁵²

Robinson told her parents, and they all got in the car and drove to speak to Helen Currin, the head of the Charleston NAACP. Currin immediately took them to meet with Superintendent Marshall. Currin “got into a pretty good size argument and she said what was on her mind, she meant what she said, and she said what she meant, at all times. Mrs. Helen was very much so like that. So she told him [Marshall], ‘You’re going to get her a way to go to school tomorrow or else you won’t have your job no more’ and she said ‘cause I’ll go all the way to Washington DC, before she won’t have a way to go to school.’” The next day, Aretha Robinson had a way to school, but it was a Black driver named Stennis Clemons, from Charleston, who picked up kids in a little station wagon. It was a small but incomplete victory.⁶⁵³

The limited degree of desegregation of eleventh and twelfth grades in 1955 gave local Black parents hope that progress would continue. The contingency and uncertainty described by Marshall Currin reared its head, however, when a staunchly pro-segregationist school board member was elected the following April. He was a leader of one of the white resistance groups formed in response to desegregation the previous fall. Instead of moving forward and integrating more grades for the 1956-1957 school year, the Board discussed expanding Lincoln School.

⁶⁵² Aretha Robinson, interview by Heidi Dodson, May 31, 2012; Marshall Currin and Theosia J. Emory to A. P. Marshall, 7 September 1955, part 3, roll 1, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁵³ Aretha Robinson, interview with Heidi Dodson, MO, May 31, 2012.

Moreover, Theodosia J. Emory, a teacher, NAACP secretary, and leader pushing integration, discovered her contract had not been renewed. Emory, born Theodosia Jenkins in Poplar Bluff, Butler County, had been a teacher and NAACP member in Charleston as far back as 1940. Her husband, Ernest W. Emory, was a teacher in St. Charles, Missouri in the 1910s and who then moved to Lincoln School around 1921. In 1944, Theodosia enlisted in the Women's Army Corps, one of 6,500 African American women nationwide who did so. Later, she returned to teaching. By 1956, with her years of teaching experience, three years of college, and military experience, she was undoubtedly one of the most qualified teachers in the area.⁶⁵⁴

Superintendent J. H. Marshall reassured Emory that he wanted to integrate the high school teachers at Charleston High School and told her she was one of the best. But he claimed there were not enough students for the three Black teachers they had, and the Board said they would keep the two teachers with the most years. Presumably, he was suggesting there were not enough Black students at Charleston High School to justify three Black teachers, indicating there was some kind of formula they were using when thinking about integrating the teachers.

Emory, however, saw an underlying strategy in their choices. The Board said it was going to expand Charleston High School to accommodate Black students, but not until the fall of 1957. Emory knew that one of the teachers who was retained did not have enough qualifications, and the other teacher had enough years for retirement. She anticipated that the school board

⁶⁵⁴ Theodosia J. Emory to Gloster Current, May 6, 1956, part 3, series D, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP; Ernest Emory, *1910 U.S. Federal Census*, St. Charles Ward 1, St. Charles, MO, page 2B; Ancestry.com, "Ernest William Emory," U.S. World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918; Ernest W. Emory, death certificate, February 2, 1937, certificate 7271, Mississippi County, Missouri, <http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/deathcertificates/>; Theodosia J. Emory, U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946, NARA, Ancestry.com; Brenda L. Moore, "African Americans in the Military," *The Columbia Guide to African American History Since 1939*, eds. Robert L. Harris and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 123. The Ancestry World War II Army Enlistment index lists Theodosia J. Emory's race as white. It is possible there was a transcription error, or she may have passed for white.

would let both teachers go the next year. She, on the other hand, had tenure and noted that “they would have been stuck with me since I didn’t fit in either of the other categories. I know two other teachers (qualified) who have been let out for no apparent reason.” As a founding member of the Charleston NAACP who was now pushing for desegregation, she was targeted by the school board. Emory’s situation was the beginning of the decimation of Black teaching staff in the Bootheel during the process of integration, which would take place over the next decade and never be fully remedied.⁶⁵⁵

By 1956, desegregation had stalled in Charleston and in the Bootheel region. In September 1956, the *Atlanta Daily World* published a snapshot of integration in the South, based on data from the Southern Education Reporting Service (SERS). For Missouri, it reported “in the high schools, only 700 Negro pupils in six schools are under segregation and all of those are in Southeast Missouri. In elementary schools, 7,300 Negroes are attending segregated schools and 4,000 of those are in Southeast Missouri.” The *Milwaukee Journal* praised the “good progress” of Missouri, but also drew attention to the recalcitrance of the Bootheel where “traditions are southern.” Education officials were aware of the situation and “generally concede that if no move is made in the next few years, Negro leaders will file suits.”⁶⁵⁶

For the juniors and seniors attending Charleston High, conditions were still unequal within the school. Students could play football or basketball, but they could not join any clubs. This meant they were not eligible for honor roll, which required participation in extracurricular activities. They could not eat lunch at the high school, but instead had to walk to Currin’s Café,

⁶⁵⁵ Theodosia J. Emory to Gloster Current, May 6, 1956, part 3, series D, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁵⁶ “State by State Roundup of School Integration,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 20, 1956; “Integration in Missouri Making Good Progress,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21, 1956.

or someplace where they could be served. If they did play football, they were relegated to defensive positions. Heard remembered that “maybe they would have one running back that would run the ball. But if you got down to the twenty-yard line, the quarterback...would make sure the black players would not make a touchdown.”

Despite limited school desegregation, in other aspects of daily life segregation was still firmly in place. Preston Heard moved to Charleston from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and was able to compare the two places. Segregation was about the same. In Missouri, however, there was not the same degree of physical violence. Heard had known Vernon Dahmer, a Black civil rights activist in Hattiesburg, who was murdered for helping people register to vote. In Missouri, African Americans could vote, although tenant farmers and laborers were often coerced by employers.⁶⁵⁷

The Costs of Segregated and Underfunded School Transportation

Except for Sikeston and Charleston, no desegregation occurred in other high schools. In Pemiscot County there were two Black high schools, in Caruthersville and Hayti. Black students across the county who wanted to attend school beyond eighth grade traveled long distances to these schools, or boarded with families in town, incurring expenses they could ill afford. The state of Missouri required school districts to pay for transportation of students to the nearest Black high school, but full compliance was inconsistent.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁷ Preston and Bonnie Heard, interview with Heidi Dodson, January 23, 2013.

⁶⁵⁸ Eugene Speller, interview with Heidi Dodson, June 11, 2012.

In the Wardell area, for example, there was a significant Black population that included the Delmo Community of Homestown (formerly South Wardell). The closest option for these residents would have been to attend the white high school in Wardell, but instead students had to ride the bus to Hayti. The bus had been provided by the Hayti School District, but in 1955 fire destroyed five out of six of the district's school buses. A news article indicates the district planned to replace four buses.⁶⁵⁹ Around that time, Lewis Henry, a resident of Homestown who usually drove the kids to school, applied to the Delmo Housing Corporation for a \$1,600 loan to make a down payment on a school bus. He wanted it to transport about eighty-five children and use it for other purposes. Although the records are not entirely clear, it appears the Hayti school district did not replace the bus used by Wardell area students. The Wardell school district was willing to pay Henry to drive a bus but would not pay for the bus itself. The DHC board members were divided in opinion as to whether to give the loan to Henry, but they finally approved it and over the next two years Henry struggled to make payments, which were sometimes late. In mid-October of 1956, for example, there were three weeks when he did not get paid to transport children to school, because it was "cotton vacation," when school was closed because students were working in the fields. The cotton had opened early that year, throwing off his anticipated pay schedule. Henry persevered, however, and paid off the balance in September 1957.⁶⁶⁰

Parents had long been resourceful in finding ways to transport children to school. As with Lewis Henry, it was not uncommon for an individual or group of people to purchase a bus

⁶⁵⁹ Sonny Sanders, "Five Hayti School Buses Destroyed," *The Courier News* (Blytheville, AR), July 21, 1955.

⁶⁶⁰ Minutes, BOD, May 23 1955; Harold Hanke to Mrs. Roscoe Anderson, July 13, 1955; Grace Hansen to Harold Hanke, n.d.; Harold Hanke to Grace Hansen, September 27, 1957; f. "Lewis Henry School Bus Loan," box 3, series 1, Delmo Housing Corporation Records, WU.

to use. In the 1950s, Wilson City resident Lee Lane drove all around the rural Wyatt areas in Mississippi County to pick up kids to take to Booker T. Washington School in Wyatt. As far back as the 1940s, Eugene Speller, in order to get to high school, walked from his family's farm to the all-white town of East Prairie, where he rode the Brown Shoe Company worker shuttle to the town of Charleston. He and his sister usually rode together and were the only African Americans on the bus. On January 26, 1942, Eugene rode alone, and had a very close call. The previous morning, Black mill worker Cleo Wright was lynched in Sikeston, twenty miles away. In the rural area where Speller lived, there were no phones, radios, or newspaper delivery, so he stepped up into the bus unaware of the powder keg situation. Speller recalled, "[I was a] little fellow, I weighed 115 pounds soaking wet. I got on the bus, there was a big bruiser, white man who wasn't a normal rider. He looked at me, he said, 'there's a nigger, bop the nigger'nobody moved. He said 'Hey, bop that nigger.'" Fortunately, one of the other riders spoke up for him, and talked the man down.⁶⁶¹

Speller's daily ten-mile ride with white workers placed him in a vulnerable position, but it was the only way he could hope to avoid his parents' life as sharecroppers. It was, in fact, very unusual for teenage boys to attend high school at that time, because most were needed on the farm. It was more common for girls to attend. Speller's parents, Bud and Nicula, were determined that their children would get a better education. Eugene's mother created a homemade blackboard from material she got in a junkyard, and taught Eugene before he formally attended school. When he entered at age four, he was placed in the second grade. His mother had two years of high school education, which made this possible. Eugene recalled that

⁶⁶¹ Aretha Robinson, interview with Heidi Dodson, May 31, 2012, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC; Eugene Speller, interview with Heidi Dodson, October 18, 2013.

his mother was the only black person in his community who had ever seen the inside of a high school. She also taught other sharecroppers basic math so they were less likely to be cheated by landowners. The sacrifices Eugene's parents made paid off. He went on to get an engineering degree and worked for John Deere in Waterloo, Iowa, and later became president of a community college in Chicago.

Black rural and town schools were highly valued centers of community life, but the costs and indignities of inferior transportation and education spurred parents and students to push for integration. Many parents wanted their children to have the best preparation for a college education, especially when there was no possibility of making a living in agriculture. By the 1950s, high schools like Hayti and Charleston had excellent, college-educated teachers, but the school district did not support the same curriculum at Black high schools as was offered at the white high schools.⁶⁶²

Gobler, Pemiscot County Desegregation Attempts, 1958-1960

In 1958, because of disparities in education quality, and transportation burdens, the Gobler NAACP branch led the first attempt at integrating a white high school in Pemiscot County. Gobler was a small rural community founded in the early twentieth century that remained unincorporated until 1948. Around 1930, it became the site of a significant Black farming community, formed by migrants from Arkansas and Mississippi. Quite a few Black families were able to purchase land cheaply, probably from the Wisconsin Lumber Company,

⁶⁶² Clyde S. Cahill Jr. to President, Charleston School Board, Charleston, MO, August 28, 1961, part 3, series 3, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

which started selling its holdings around 1930.⁶⁶³ At least two officers of the town's NAACP branch, treasurer Chester Williams and Secretary Hal Walls, were landowners, a status that afforded them some protection from economic retribution for their actions. Bob S. Beck, who was Gobler NAACP President in 1957, was also a landowner and had been on the STFU national executive council in 1941.⁶⁶⁴

In November 1958, the officers wrote NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins, asking for information about integrating public schools. Gobler area students, like those near Wardell, had to ride a bus to Hayti to attend high school, instead of being able to attend the white high schools at Wardell and Deering, which were closer. A committee of five NAACP members had gone to the school district board of directors, seeking admission to Wardell High School for their students, but they "were refused on the grounds that they had teachers from the State of Mississippi. The directors promised them they would not integrate the schools, and the community wouldn't like the idea." Williams told Wilkins "As far as we know they don't intend to integrate these schools without a court order."⁶⁶⁵

The situation bore similarities to Charleston. The fact that the Board was bowing to the pressure of teachers, and perhaps parents, from further South illustrates the influence migration had on the area. It also revealed, however, that there was a wide spectrum of resistance to desegregation and there were cracks in white solidarity that could be exploited. As in Charleston, a contingent of whites could exert pressure towards maintaining segregation, but if

⁶⁶³ Starks, "Gobler's Black Heritage," 167-168; Paul Harrison and Irene Neel Burns, "The Town and Post Office of Gobler," *Pemiscot County Missouri Quarterly* 2 no. 2 (October 1976): 154-155.

⁶⁶⁴ Ancestry.com, 1940 U. S. Federal Census, "Bob S. Beck," Gobbler Road, Braggadocio, Pemiscot, MO, p. 24B; "Southern Tenant Farmers Pledge to Support A.F. of L.," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 20, 1941.

⁶⁶⁵ Walter Williams, Hal Walls, and Chester Williams to Roy Wilkins, November 26, 1958, part 3, series 3, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

African Americans pushed back, the absence of massive resistance in the larger white population meant the possibility of progress without violence.

Unfortunately, this also often meant long delays as families navigated school board meetings, the bureaucracy of the NAACP, and the legal system. When attempts at desegregation were not met with violence, they received less attention and were treated with less urgency by the national NAACP office and the press. The Gobler branch was persistent in its efforts to pursue desegregation, but the NAACP national office and the Missouri State Conference of Branches were slow to assist with legal help.

When the branch officers first wrote Wilkins in 1958, the letter was forwarded to Gloster B. Current, who sent it on to Robert Carter, general counsel for the NAACP. He responded in early February 1959, suggesting that he would see if the parents in the two school districts were interested in taking further steps. At the beginning of April, Chester Williams replied that they were interested, and they planned to meet with the school board for Deering High School on May 14, 1959. The school board denied their request, saying it would form a committee to study the issue. Board officials gave no timeline for a response, and the Gobler branch recognized it as a delay tactic. Williams and about twenty parents then filed a petition. On July 13, 1959 the first day of enrollment at Deering, Williams took eight children to the white high school, where they were turned away. Apparently there was at least one angry white bystander, but Chester Williams reported that Sheriff Clyde Orton cooperated with them, offering protection from potential harm. While Williams and the students were trying to integrate Deering High School,

twenty-eight students, assisted by their parents, tried to enroll at Wardell High School. They were also turned away.⁶⁶⁶

Meanwhile, Robert Carter contacted Mrs. R. P. Beshears, the President of the Missouri NAACP State Conference of Branches, in May and October of 1959, and asked her to find the Gobler branch an attorney in Missouri, but received no response. Carter chose not to acknowledge a letter received by Chester Williams of the Gobler branch in July (addressed to Roy Wilkins, but forwarded to Carter). Chester Williams wrote again January 5, 1960, asking why they had not gotten any help from the national office, and noted that their branch had raised \$100 for the Freedom Fund Campaign. Gloster B. Current, who received a copy, asked Robert Carter to respond. In March 1960, Carter responded and indicated he had not gotten any response from the State Conference, so would forward the case to the Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF).⁶⁶⁷

Finally, in August 1961, Leonard H. Carter, Field Secretary for Region IV, reported that St. Louis attorney Clyde Cahill had been hired to help with desegregation in Pemiscot County and in Mississippi County. Three years had passed since the Gobler NAACP had initially asked for help. Meanwhile, branch activists had taken matters in their own hands as far as possible by meeting with school boards, filing petitions, and physically attempting to enroll.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁶ Memorandum, Gloster B. Current to Robert Carter, January 26, 1959; Robert L. Carter to Chester Williams, February 9, 1959; Chester Williams to Roy Wilkins, April 1, 1959; Chester Williams to Roy Wilkins, July 18, 1959, part 3, series 3, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁶⁷ Robert L. Carter to R. P. Beshears, May 14, 1959; Robert L. Carter to R. P. Beshears, October 1, 1959; Chester Williams to Roy Wilkins, January 5, 1960; Gloster B. Current to Robert L. Carter, January 20, 1960; Robert L. Carter to Chester Williams, March 15, 1960, part 3, series 3, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁶⁸ Leonard H. Carter to Robert Carter, August 21, 1961, part 3, series 3, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

“Battle of the Bootheel”: The NAACP and Legal Action, 1960-1965

The late 1950s were frustrating years for families who wanted to desegregate schools and faced steadfast opposition of whites. Between 1960 and 1961, however, the assistance of NAACP Field Secretary Leonard H. Carter and attorney Clyde Cahill provided much needed, non-local support. The Charleston branch of the NAACP had dwindled and in 1960 was down to thirty-eight members. By the end of 1961, however, it rebounded exponentially to 131 members. This was due to a combination of factors. Besides NAACP legal assistance, Helen Currin, an officer of the Charleston NAACP, had done a great deal of grassroots organizing to increase membership. Also, in 1961, George Wade, Sr., a Black sharecropper who lived in the rural Bird-Rush-Dirk area, ran for membership on the school board. By 1961, some small rural districts had consolidated and become part of the larger Charleston R-1 District.⁶⁶⁹

Members of the African American Parent Teacher Association had decided it was one way they could “get some things done.” The election was held at Charleston High School, in open meeting format, with Blacks and whites attending. There was no secret ballot; people raised their hands. There were more Black parents than white parents present. The election was close, but Wade still lost. Many people were fearful of voting so publicly. In fact, Wade faced retaliation for daring to run. Hunter Raffety, a prominent landowner, was his employer. Raffety moved him to a different house and took away the forty acres Wade sharecropped. Without the

⁶⁶⁹ Gary Kremer and Brett Rogers, *African American Schools in Rural and Small-Town Missouri* (Office of Historic Preservation, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, 2002); Preston and Bonnie Heard, interview with Heidi Dodson, January 23, 2013.

land, Wade had no income. Heard remembered that Wade “was a resilient old man, so he started cutting hair,” and was quite successful at it.⁶⁷⁰

NAACP membership also increased because high school students in rural Pinhook tried to register at several all-white high schools and were turned away.⁶⁷¹ The students at Pinhook, in Mississippi County, were in a similar situation as those in the Gbler area in Pemiscot County. There was no Black high school in their district, so they had to travel to Lincoln School in Charleston, eighteen miles away. Pinhook was a politically active Black farming community, founded in 1940. Many early residents had been founding members of the Charleston NAACP in 1940.⁶⁷²

In 1961, Lincoln High School in Charleston decided it would no longer take out-of-district high school students. This may have been because of overcrowded conditions – the high school and elementary school shared the same building – but it may also have been a strategy to force the issue of desegregation in the county. As a result of this decision, twenty-eight students from Pinhook tried to enroll in Anniston, East Prairie, and Charleston high schools. Anniston and East Prairie were closest to Pinhook, but the students were turned away from all these schools, allegedly because of overcrowding and lack of financial assistance from the Pinhook District. One solution proposed, and arranged, was for the students to attend East Lilbourn High, the high school in the Black town of Howardville that had been built in 1958. This school was in New Madrid, not Mississippi County, and would have involved a forty-mile round trip bus ride.

⁶⁷⁰ Preston and Bonnie Heard, interview by Heidi Dodson, January 23, 2013.

⁶⁷¹ Monthly Report, January and February 1962, Leonard H. Carter to Gloster B. Current, Leonard H. Carter, Field Secretary Reports, 1962, part 25, series D, Papers of the NAACP.

⁶⁷² Jim Robinson Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, October 26, 1998.

Pinhook parents refused to agree to this arrangement, and the students did not show up for school.⁶⁷³

White residents in Charleston claimed their denial of Pinhook students was not due to race, or a desire for segregation, but rather because of the need for district re-organizing. However, while these white high schools denied admittance to Black students, they accepted out-of-district white students. Lincoln High School officials said they would accept the students if the school district was re-organized to include smaller rural districts, but this was rejected by Charleston residents in a special election. By consolidating, Charleston High School would have had no justification for denying admittance of high school students in outlying areas. Jim Robinson Jr., a leader in Pinhook, recalled that they hoped to be consolidated with Charleston because of its significant Black population. Consolidation would have provided greater Black political power and increased their chance of getting someone on the school board. Charleston did eventually consolidate with rural areas, but Pinhook was joined to East Prairie, an all-white district.⁶⁷⁴

In addition to the Pinhook students trying to enroll in high school in August 1961, a group of thirty-three Black freshman and sophomores from near Charleston tried to enroll in Charleston High School and were denied admission. The high school had accepted a small number of juniors and seniors in 1955, but refused to integrate further. By this time, attorney Clyde S. Cahill Jr., chairman of the Missouri State Legal Redress Committee for the NAACP,

⁶⁷³ "Placing Negro Pupils Still Not Settled," *The Daily Standard* (Sikeston, MO), November 27, 1961; "School Proposal Rejected, Says NAACP Official's Wife," *The Daily Standard* (Sikeston, MO), November 30, 1961. The number of students trying to enroll vary according to source.

⁶⁷⁴ "School Proposal Rejected, Says NAACP Official's Wife," *The Daily Standard* (Sikeston, MO), November 30, 1961; Jim Robinson Jr., interview by Will Sarvis, October 26, 1998; Clyde S. Cahill to Robert Carter, November 17, 1961, part 3, series D, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

had been hired to deal with desegregation in Mississippi and Pemiscot counties. Cahill wrote the President of the Charleston School Board in late August 1961, advising him that the parents and students denied admission were willing to take whatever steps were necessary to gain access to the resources at Charleston High School, including legal action. Cahill asked for a plan for “a prompt and progressive advance of integration for the entire school system” as a way to avoid a lawsuit.

As a result of whites’ refusal to accept integration in the fall of 1961, the Pinhook students lost a semester of school, putting them behind in terms of graduation. With the situation at a standstill, and legal action looming, Missouri Attorney General Thomas Eagleton went to Charleston to negotiate with school officials, and Governor John M. Dalton also put pressure on county school officials. The fact that Governor Dalton was from Dunklin County, in the Bootheel, may have helped erode local resistance, at least temporarily. As a result, some but not all of the Pinhook students were accepted at Anniston High School. By the end of December, all of the students had been admitted.

The admittance of these students, as a result of state intervention and the threat of NAACP legal action, was significant; but as Cahill explained to Leonard H. Carter, they had only “taken the first hill” in their “battle of the Bootheel.” They were actively filing suit in Mississippi and Pemiscot counties to integrate not just the high schools but all schools. Moreover, the NAACP Legal Redress Committee was planning to draft a strategy for integration in the entire region, also turning attention to New Madrid County.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷⁵ Clyde S. Cahill to Robert Carter, November 17, 1961; Clyde S. Cahill to Leonard H. Carter, December 28, 1961, part 3, series D, roll 5, Papers of the NAACP.

It was during this year, in 1961, that movie director Roger Corman decided to film *The Intruder* largely in Charleston, with some scenes in Sikeston and East Prairie. The movie was based on a book of the same name by Charles Beaumont. The book had been inspired by the true story of white man who went to a southern town after the *Brown v. Board* decision, and agitated against school desegregation.⁶⁷⁶ Corman chose the Bootheel as a location by looking at a map. He recalled “I didn’t want to be in a southern state. I wanted to have, in my own mind, the protection of a midwestern state and the laws there. There I was able to get a southern look and southern accents for the townspeople. ...but I was thrown out of two towns with flat-out threats from the sheriff of one county and the chief of police in another. The sheriff actually told me ‘If you’re in town when the sun sets, you’re in jail. And don’t come back.’”⁶⁷⁷

Corman and other members of the cast and crew, including actor William Shatner, who played the role of the white agitator, probably did not realize that the NAACP had just ramped up the pressure concerning desegregation in Mississippi County. They quickly found out how tense the situation was. Shatner recalled that when the cast and crew settled in a motel just outside of Charleston, a policeman warned him, “Now, if I were you, I’d just take a few minutes and plan my escape route.” Apparently “the town had found out what this movie was about and they were not happy about it. Really not happy.” The crew finished and left town without any injuries, but their experience reveals how potentially explosive conditions were in the area.⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁶ Alan Frank, *The Films of Roger Corman: ‘Shooting My Way Out of Trouble,’* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1998), 96.

⁶⁷⁷ Constantine Nasr, ed. *Roger Corman: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 140. This incident where he was told not to be in town at sunset was in East Prairie, where they were filming a playground scene. East Prairie was a sundown town, which meant African Americans were not allowed to be there safely past sundown. Apparently this curfew extended to the white Hollywood cast and crew who were stirring things up.

⁶⁷⁸ William Shatner with David Fisher, *Up Till Now: The Autobiography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 69.

Ultimately, the NAACP helped African American students in two Bootheel districts file suit. At the end of 1962, nine students filed suit against the Board of Education of Charleston Consolidated School District No. 7 in U.S. District Court, and it went to trial in January 1963. Among the plaintiffs were property owners Marshall Currin Jr., son of Marshall and Helen Currin of Charleston, Ruby Brown, daughter of Florence Brown and granddaughter of Lucinda Crenshaw of Wyatt, Doris Holman, daughter of Abraham and Rosie Holman of Wyatt, and Larry and Lenoir Harris, children of Wyatt teacher Charles Harris. Other plaintiffs were Johnnie Davis, Verna Gordon, and John Stark. Three of the families were involved in the 1948 effort to get a Black school near North Wyatt.⁶⁷⁹

In April 1963, students in Pemiscot County filed suit in U.S. District Court against the Board of Education for the R-VI District, which included Wardell. Hal Walls Jr. was named as the lead plaintiff. His father Hal Walls, Sr., was a landowner and officer of the Gobler NAACP. As described earlier, the fight to desegregate in this area began with the Gobler NAACP in 1958, with the additional leadership of Chester and Walter Williams.

Both cases were heard by U.S. District Judge James H. Meredith in St. Louis. The Charleston School Board was asked to submit a desegregation plan. Officials tried to prolong the process over a number of years, but Meredith found no justification for this and ordered immediate desegregation. The decree for Pemiscot R-VI, which was issued without an actual trial, provided a little more leeway. Different elementary grades were integrated by semester, leading to full elementary desegregation by the start of the next school year in July 1964.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁹ Plan for Desegregation, Johnnie Davis, et. al. vs. Board of Education of Charleston Consolidated School District No. 7 of Mississippi County, Missouri, Litigation Files, 1964-1967, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Office of the General Counsel, , NARA-CP.

⁶⁸⁰ Decree, Hal Walls Jr., et al., vs. Board of Education, District R-VI, Pemiscot County, Missouri, f. North Pemiscot R-1 (Ross-Wardell), box 5, Desegregation Southern Schools, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, NARA-CP.

Finally, as a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) had the ability to enforce directives to desegregate by threatening to withhold funding from school districts.⁶⁸¹ Many districts in the Bootheel had to submit desegregation plans that included elementary schools. Most of the desegregation plans, implemented in the 1965-66 school year, were freedom of choice plans, which meant African Americans had to take the initiative of enrolling in white schools.⁶⁸² This left segregation largely intact. By the end of the 1960s, desegregation plans were not enough, and school districts had to show that schools were no longer operating on a racially segregated basis. Full integration in the Bootheel, which usually involved the closing of Black schools, occurred by 1968-1969.⁶⁸³

As this chapter has shown, legal battles were an important part of African Americans' strategies to obtain a quality education for their children in the Bootheel, but the full story cannot be known without understanding the connections between the built environment, Black struggles, and white resistance. In the case of North Wyatt, residents' refusal to give up their community building was an important weapon in the fight for a new school. One of the reasons they were able to refuse the school district's offer and subsequently attempt to desegregate the white elementary school at Wyatt was because they had some economic security through homeownership. The activism of Marshal and Helen Currin, and of the plaintiffs in desegregation cases, was facilitated by business and landownership. But their actions would not

⁶⁸¹ *Historical Dictionary of School Segregation and Desegregation: The American Experience*, s. v. "Civil Rights Act of 1964" by Jeffrey A. Raffel (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 49.

⁶⁸² Desegregation plans for Pemiscot and Dunklin County are in the box 5, Desegregation Southern Schools, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, NARA-CP. Undoubtedly there were more plans filed from other counties, such as New Madrid, but these include the districts of Hayti Reorganized District No. 2, McCarty R-3, Caruthersville No. 18, Deering C-6, South Pemiscot R-5, North Pemiscot R-1, Cooter R-4, Braggadocio C-4, and Kennett No. 39 (Bragg City) – Dunklin County.

⁶⁸³ K'Meyer, *From Brown to Meredith*, 52-4.

have been possible without the courage of families who did not own property, such as the Myles family (Aretha Myles Robinson), sharecropper George Wade, and the people who tried to elect him to the school board.

For the most part, African Americans' educational battles in the Bootheel have faded from public memory. The activism associated with Black communities like North Wyatt and Gobler have been overshadowed by white-centered narratives of development and poverty that tend to depoliticize and silence rural black history. Many, but not all the spaces associated with educational and other struggles, have disappeared. It is vitally important, then, to ask questions about presences and absences in the landscape, to excavate the power struggles undertaken for and through the vernacular spaces of rural black community life. There are clues that help us unearth these forgotten stories. At the entrance to Wilson City (formerly North Wyatt), a sign stands prominently, indicating that the community, established in 1941, is the "Home of the Women's Club" (shown in Figure 33). Interrogating the meaning of such markers, and uncovering those that have been removed, open an important window into everyday grassroots struggles in rural places like the Bootheel.

Chapter 6 Figures

Figure 30. This is a photo of Sanders Chapel A.M.E. Church, in Wyatt, Missouri. It was established in 1925, and is one of many rural churches established soon after the migration of 1923.



Source: Photo by author, 2012.

Figure 31. This is a photo of the white elementary school built ca. 1941 in Wyatt, Missouri. All the local school bonds were used for its construction, leaving no funding for the construction of a school for African Americans.



Source: Photo by author, 2012.

Figure 32. Photo of Aretha Myles Robinson (left) and her daughter Twan Robinson (right) in Sikeston, Missouri.



Source: Photo by author, June 4, 2012, Twan Robinson interview, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007, SHC.

Figure 33. This sign stands at the entrance to Wilson City, Missouri, originally the Delmo community of North Wyatt. It reads “Welcome to Wilson City, Home of the Women’s Club, City Founded 1941.” It is a symbol of community pride and indicates the importance of the Women’s Club to the village’s history.



Source: Photo by author, 2012.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century, African Americans played a significant role in the physical, social, and economic development of the Missouri Bootheel. They cut down vast hardwood forests, cleared stumps, battled floods, and built homes for their families, often in physical and social environments where whites were hostile to their presence. Living by a producerist ethic that valued hard work, and contributions to local their community and the nation, they raised families, and grew crops and gardens that fed and clothed people near and far. As union member Johnnie F. Moore and many other sharecroppers and laborers reminded government officials in 1939, when they sought assistance to deal with their displacement, “We feel that we are entitled to this since we want to work and since we are Americans and since we helped to make America what it is today.”⁶⁸⁴

Most whites in the Bootheel looked away from these contributions, however, ignoring African Americans’ citizenship, humanity, and right to work and live throughout the region. In 1937, when African Americans pursued their right to federal New Deal resources, they faced opponents who claimed they “add nothing whatever to the wealth and well being of the community.” In 1941, near Wardell, Missouri, many local white resisted the construction of a labor housing project for African Americans because it was “white man’s country,” and because they would have to expand educational facilities.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁴ Johnnie F. Moore, et al. to Gov. Lloyd Stark, March 27, 1939, f. 1939, Lloyd Crow Stark Papers, 1931-1941, SHSMO-CO.

⁶⁸⁵ J. I. Murlison/Burlison to Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941. This letter appears to be signed J. I. Murlison, but it was likely a typographical error. Other correspondence suggests it was J. I. Burlison, a local planter ; Oscar Fuller to Hon. Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941; O. A. Knight to Orville Zimmerman, February 17, 1941; P. G. Beck to C. B. Baldwin, 21 March 1941, f. “RP-MO-21-911-045,” box 414, FSA & Predecessor Agencies Project Records, 1935-1940, Records of the FHA, NARA-CP.

These examples illustrate one of the enduring themes of African Americans' experience in the Bootheel, and indeed the rest of the country. Instead of being able to freely pursue their lives in all space and places, as every citizen should be able to do, African Americans were welcome on a contingent basis as laborers, not citizens. Moreover, as laborers, they often encountered hostility from white laborers who saw them as economic competition. African Americans were not willing to let their lives be delimited by whites, so they employed space-making as one method of resisting white supremacy and defining themselves. They collectively built homes, churches, masonic lodges, restaurants, towns, and other institutions, which diversified and expanded the fabric of civil society in the Bootheel. In turn, they used these spaces to launch labor and civil rights struggles.

As African Americans transformed the Bootheel through their labor and community-building, the choices they made were constrained by structural forms of racism that continue to affect African Americans lives today. Injustices of the past are a direct source of the poverty and crime that plague rural Black communities and town neighborhoods. Moreover, racism persists through discriminatory policing and court sentencing, exploitative mortgage lending, the erasure of Black history and struggle, and an unwillingness among whites to discuss and acknowledge how racism has shaped the regional landscape and rural communities today. Several years ago when I was doing research in Sikeston, I stopped at the Sikeston Depot Museum. A staff member showed me some photographs of the 1939 roadside demonstration that someone had donated. He noted, however, that the museum board would not want to put such a controversial topic on display.⁶⁸⁶ Black and white workers organized the roadside

⁶⁸⁶ The demonstration is briefly mentioned in a promotional pamphlet about Sikeston, but it indicates the sharecroppers were protesting government policy, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and erases the role of landowners in creation the conditions for the protest. "Welcome to Sikeston, Missouri: Where Southern Hospitality Begins!," <http://www.visitsikeston.com/docs/CVBdocs/VisitorsGuide2.pdf>

demonstration to protest their exploitation, but racial oppression was an inextricable part of class struggle.

Historian George Lipsitz, in his book *How Racism Takes Place*, delineates forms of structural racism that continue to shape society. He challenges “the people blaming Blacks for the persistence of unequal racial outcomes in U. S. society today to come to grips with the fatal couplings of place and race in our society.” Specifically, he looks at how “social relations take on their full force and meaning when they are enacted physically in actual places.”⁶⁸⁷

The history of Pinhook, Missouri illustrates the relationship between race and place, past and present. On May 2, 2011, residents tragically faced the worst-case scenario for their community. Heavy rains caused the Mississippi River to steadily rise to levels that qualified it as a 100-year flood. Fearing the devastation of Cairo, Illinois, across the river, and other river communities, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers dynamited the Bird’s Point Levee. It was the first time they had done so since the 1937 flood. As a result, water barreled into the Birds-Point New Madrid Floodway, and washed over the Union Baptist Church and the homes of Pinhook residents. All the residents evacuated, but they did not have much notice, so they lost many personal belongings. Prior to the levee blast, they did not get any official notification, nor any assistance in evacuating. They were not asked to be involved in meetings or discussion that took place beforehand. Debra Tarver, mayor of Pinhook, learned about the mandatory evacuation through a friend at work. In the aftermath of the evacuation, residents received no assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The actions of the Corps of Engineers added one more chapter, possibly a final chapter, to the community’s history of displacement. Pinhook was founded in 1940 by sharecroppers and

⁶⁸⁷ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 5.

tenant farmers who were being pushed off the land in 1939, when sharecropping transitioned to farm labor. Because of white rural apartheid, they were only allowed to buy land in the Floodway. Periodically, over the years, they had to scramble to flee seasonal floods that would leave them stranded if they stayed. After the 2011 levee blast, Aretha Robinson and her daughter Debra Tarver rented a house in Sikeston, and other friends and family dispersed throughout the region. This dislocation caused financial loss, but just as critically, it also meant the deprivation of the social support such a close-knit community had provided. Aretha Robinson lamented the loss of her garden and the time she spent chopping peas and beans and greens. She loved cooking and feeding people.⁶⁸⁸ In town, she was a fish out of water, but she adapted and continued to cook for anyone who stopped by to visit. For many people who grew up in Pinhook, even though they now lived somewhere else, Pinhook was home, a place to go back to. One former resident wrote a song in tribute to the community, with these lyrics:

Home that is my home...that the Mighty Mississippi now calls its own
 My family flee they run from thee, this one thing I know
 I love this space, this sacred place. I will never let it go⁶⁸⁹

Debra Tarver and others applied to FEMA for a buyout as part of the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, so they could rebuild Pinhook in a new location. They had the support of politicians like Steve Hodges, a white state representative. As of yet, however, they have not

⁶⁸⁸ Todd Lawrence and Elaine Lawless, *Taking Pinhook*, "Pinhook, Missouri," <https://rebuildpinhook.wordpress.com/2014/02/21/pinhook-documentary-premieres-at-university-of-missouri/>.

⁶⁸⁹ Faye Mack, "Heartland Home," excerpt in "Mary Delach Leonard, "Pinhook, Mo.: Levee Breach Destroyed the Village, but Changing Times Had Already Taken a Toll," *St. Louis Beacon*, March 11, 2013, https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/29769/pinhook_relocate_part_2.

been able to rebuild.⁶⁹⁰ In August 2015, the remnants of the Pinhook community were cleared away.⁶⁹¹

The destruction of Pinhook has received some media attention because of the persistence of residents and allies, but many people had not even heard of Pinhook, because it was a small Black rural community far from a major highway. The destruction, displacement, and suffering caused by the human-made and natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina has been at the top of extensive scholarly and public discussion, and rightly so. Yet, smaller-scale injustices in rural areas take place across the South and exist out of view.⁶⁹²

As we consider issues of race, space, and social and economic justice, from a historical and contemporary standpoint, it is critical, to turn our attention to rural, as well as urban areas. The histories of Black rural struggle may not always be visible. Many early community spaces, such as churches, schools, and even entire communities like Pinhook, have been demolished. The memories of these communities are kept alive, however, through family stories, homecomings, and reunions. Understanding how Black freedom struggles have literally taken place, and how white supremacy has operated through the landscape, are critical for understanding African Americans' experiences in this country, and their role in shaping region and nation.

⁶⁹⁰ Mary Delach Leonard, "Pinhook, Mo.: Levee Breach Destroyed the Village, but Changing Times Had Already Taken a Toll," *St. Louis Beacon*, https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/29769/pinhook_relocate_part_2

⁶⁹¹ "Former Pinhook Residents Watch as Bulldozers Level What's Left of the Town the 2011 Flood Destroyed," *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, MO), August 7, 2015.

⁶⁹² Another interesting case of displacement as a result of the expansion of Gulfport, Mississippi, revolves around a community called Turkey Creek. See Leah Mahan, *Come Hell or High Water: the Battle for Turkey Creek* (Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2015).

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